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## **Faculty and Administrator's Perspective on Degree Completion Initiatives in the Commonwealth of Kentucky**

Jennifer Hammonds

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FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON DEGREE COMPLETION  
INITIATIVES IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY

A dissertation submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

In  
Leadership Studies  
by

Jennifer Hammonds

Approved by

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May 2021

## APPROVAL OF DISSERTATION

We, the faculty supervising the work of **Jennifer Hammonds**, affirm that the dissertation, *Faculty and Administrator's Perspective on Degree Completion Initiatives in the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the EdD Program in **Leadership Studies** and the College of Education and Professional Development. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to each of my family members, colleagues, and friends who never hesitated to support me throughout this journey. I dedicate this dissertation to my father, whom I know could not be prouder of his daughter as he smiles down from heaven. Every dad is a superhero to his children, and I thank my dad for being mine. He lost his battle with cancer just months before I completed this study. I know you are watching over me; I hope this makes you proud. I miss you. To my stepmom, you are strong in the most difficult of times.

My dedication extends to my mother, who encouraged me to always chase my dreams. You never hesitate to support me with my endeavors. You have helped me to be the person I am today. You are my inspiration. I proudly become a little more like you every day. I get it now – wine really does make everything better. To my stepdad, thanks for putting up with my mom. You always believed I would earn this title long before I ever knew that I wanted to.

I dedicate my accomplishment to my loving husband, who challenged me on who could earn the title Doctor first. While I may not have earned the title first, I am incredibly grateful for your support and encouragement. You pushed me when I needed it most, which seemed to be every day towards the end. Even if it were only to remind me that you were the only “doctor” in the house. Thank you for being by my side through so many late nights, mood swings, and those days when I was not as good of a partner as I should have been. You kept me on track even as your deployment put miles and miles between us. You are my biggest supporter. Here’s to our mail being addressed to Drs. Josh & Jennifer Hammonds.

To my children, Dustin, Sophia, and JC, I dedicate my accomplishment as an example of chasing your dreams until they become a reality. Thank you for your love and patience, as this degree took me away from you and often accompanied us on vacations and weekends when I

wanted nothing more than to spend time with you all. I am so ready to spend more time with each of you. Always remember, Dreams don't work unless you do. So, be prepared to put in the work it takes to make those dreams into reality. I love you more than you will ever know.

To all my family members and friends who supported me, Thank you!

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to better understand the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail to earn a degree and how institutions retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees. Degree completion is a national, state, and institutional priority as all groups are falling short on meeting degree attainment goals. Currently, there is an abundance of literature on why students stopout. The literature does not directly propose strategies that would increase degree completion or determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies. This research helps fill the gap in the literature and will be used by the researcher to support policy improvement and recommend institutional changes based on the findings. This qualitative study explored faculty and administrators' perceptions on degree completion initiatives to identify recommendations for best practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 faculty and administrators from three four-year public institutions located in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The universities selected for this study participated in the statewide initiative known as Project Graduate. Narratives were constructed for each participant and resulted in four themes: training for faculty and staff, central point of contact, additional funding and scholarship dollars, and prior learning assessment policy. The findings of this study are informative to the campus community, including academic leaders, faculty, and administrators, who are interested in the sustainability of degree completion initiatives. Given the limited research in strategies and best practices, this dissertation advances our understanding of how universities can use available resources to meet degree attainment goals.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

There are many implications for leaving college without a degree. Students who leave before earning a degree cost a university thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition, fees, and alumni donations (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). The student will also earn much less over a lifetime of work. While the environment of higher education has changed, more universities and states are looking for ways to increase student persistence and graduation rates at both two- and four-year colleges and universities. Research shows that student and faculty interaction is most critical during the first year of college (Tinto, 2006). Universities, such as the three in this study, offer services to assist with the transition to college. If college completion rates do not improve, researchers predict a decline in the nation's economic success, as well as limited economic progress for millions of Americans (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Steele & Erisman, 2016). Degree completion is a national, state, and institutional priority. Thirty states have shifted funding to a performance-based funding model; therefore, universities need to understand the factors that inspire and hinder degree completion and implement programs and strategies to reverse the declining rates of degree completion (Li & Kennedy, 2018; Kelchen & Stedrak, 2016).

### **Background**

Attrition is most often caused by dropout instead of students flunking out (otherwise known as “stopout” in the literature), which translates to a high cost for students and society. Students who dropout or stopout cause a decrease in university budgets, employment, course sections, services, and the ability to meet the university mission causing an increase in tuition and fees (Raisman, 2016; Raisman, 2009). When students stopout, dropout, or fail to graduate, universities' ability to meet their educational mission and services decline. Schools lose the

capacity to support people and their state in meeting career and intellectual goals. Similarly, the state and nation fall short on meeting degree attainment and career goals. Nearly all states are below the college degree attainment numbers they need to fulfill jobs that require a more educated workforce (Wheatle, Taylor, Bragg, Ajinkya, & Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2017). More students are stopping out each year than graduating (Raisman, 2013; Raisman, 2009). Initiatives that focus on helping students remain enrolled and graduate will help universities, states, and the nation to see greater results in citizens' achievement and create a more robust economy.

Raisman (2009) indicates an average of \$6,000 is spent on recruiting and enrolling a new student to a public institution each year; therefore, any student who stops out takes at least \$12,000 with him or her. This amount is the cost the school spent enrolling the student to the university and the amount it will cost the school to recruit and enroll another student to take his or her place. It is noted in Raisman's research that there is no guarantee enrolling another student will occur immediately. As a result, the school will continue to lose tuition revenue until the new enrollment occurs.

Student retention and completion requires the entire college to participate in behaviors that contribute to student success (Boylan, Calderwood, & Bonham, 2017). Academic and student affairs must collaborate on enhancing student services and programming. Additionally, keeping students enrolled is the responsibility of everyone at the institution, not just academic programs. It is important that everyone knows their role and how to play them. Universities should continue to rethink faculty and administrator roles that could require retraining them to fulfill newer roles. For example, faculty development efforts could focus on teaching faculty members to engage more with students. Boylan et al. (2017) cite research that shows the more

faculty engage in meaningful ways with students, the more likely a student succeeds in courses and college. Other topics in faculty development programs should incorporate activities associated with teaching today's college students, particularly those from minority, low income, or first-generation backgrounds. Administrators could benefit by learning from faculty; faculty could collaborate more frequently with administrators to promote student services such as tutoring and other academic resources into the classroom.

Donhardt (2013) reports degree completion is the essential measure of academic success. Retention is important; however, graduation outcomes are the greatest measure of academic achievement. Students need a baccalaureate degree to apply to graduate school and obtain certain jobs. These degrees are used to determine a prospective employee's abilities and skill set. Donhardt (2013) adds that the economic and social advantages of an education are not realized until the degree has been awarded. Thus, students and university stakeholders are concerned with impediments to degree completion. Universities must take action to improve degree completion rates. One such strategy is to recruit students who have previously stopped out of an institution.

Degree completion initiatives are becoming increasingly prevalent within postsecondary institutions (Bergman, 2016). Initiatives, such as Project Graduate, have emerged to focus on students who have some college credit but no degree. Universities are struggling to understand why students stopout or dropout; however, they recognize the need to reduce barriers that prevent degree completion. They need a better understanding of policies and practices that impede student success. The institutions that show the highest gains in college completion have support from board members, senior leadership, and all faculty and staff who are dedicated to improving completion rates. Universities must work to encourage some college, no degree

populations to re-enroll at the institution and earn a degree. Student retention and, more importantly, degree completion matters more than ever.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Those who study student retention report that keeping students is the responsibility of the entire university; however, the roles of faculty and administrators should be clearly defined (Boylan, Calderwood, & Bonham, 2017). Institutions may need to rethink the roles of various college personnel, which could require retraining to fulfill these defined roles. Faculty and administrators could play a central role in degree completion initiatives as universities seek to reach institutional, state, and national degree attainment goals. There is a lack of research on the exact roles faculty and administrators play in these initiatives and what policies might interfere with a student's persistence to graduation, particularly in the Project Graduate initiative led by the Council for Postsecondary Education (CPE) on behalf of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Project Graduate, which launched in 2008, was a statewide "comebacker" initiative designed to recruit, retain, and graduate returning adult learners with 80 or more credit hours but no bachelor's degree (Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education, 2017). The initiative was a collaboration among all public four-year institutions in Kentucky. Given the premises above, the study will examine the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding their knowledge and role in degree completion initiatives at three select institutions.

### **Purpose**

Millions of students will still be without a degree unless individual institutions identify and reengage students who stopout from their institution. Universities will need to turn what they know about student retention into action that leads to increased gains in graduation rates. For necessary changes in faculty and administrator development and training to take place,



university administration and policymakers must account for the knowledge, attitudes, and needs of faculty and administrators. The purpose of this study was: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies. The intent was to better understand the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how the institution may retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees.

Strategies because of this study will not only need to be developed but also fully resourced to ensure student success. Often, ideas fall short of being fully implemented while other ideas fail because of unsupportive administrators. This study explored the student engagements needed by the institutions to maximize the return on investment of campus resources. The campuses should experience an increase in completion rates as student behaviors and perceptions are better understood. The understanding of why students stopout can assist the colleges in intervening early and often and in supporting students so they can finish what they start. As a result of this study, a set of recommendations have been provided to the institutions to assist with accelerating student success to prevent student stopout.

### **Research Questions**

1. What significant factors affect degree completion among the students enrolled at an institution?
2. What academic and administrative policies potentially interfere with a students' persistence to graduation?
3. What faculty and staff resources are offered to help students in completing their degree requirements?

4. What faculty and staff resources are needed to help students in completing their degree requirements?

### **Significance**

More than 43 million people in the United States are over the age of 25 who have earned college credit yet no degree (Bergman, 2016). Predictions for 2020 indicated 65% of all jobs in the United States would require some level of postsecondary education (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Wheatle, Taylor, Bragg, Ajinkya, & Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2017). Those predictions were close to accurate, according to Blumenstyk (2020), who reported that 70 percent of workers were in these jobs in 2018 as compared to 59 percent in 2010 based on data from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. This data indicates people are becoming more educated than originally predicted since employers are paying more to individuals who have a bachelor's degree than those who do not have the degree. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (as cited in Blumenstyk, 2020) predict in 2027 that 70 percent of all jobs will require some education beyond high school, specifically for bachelor's- and master's level jobs, representing 25 percent and 15 percent of the workforce. There will be fewer jobs for people with some college and no degree.

Many states have established college completion goals intended to increase the number of individuals with a college credential by 2025 (Wheatle, Taylor, Bragg, Ajinkya, & Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2017). In previous years, colleges received funding by the number of students enrolled in classes at the census date, which is when schools take a snapshot of all students' enrollment for both state reporting and financial aid eligibility. Most states have shifted to a performance-based funding model for public institutions that allocates each fiscal year existing state funding be tied to course and degree completion, as well as student success in

gateway courses (Kelchen & Stedrak, 2016). State funding is a primary mechanism of subsidizing the instructional costs at public institutions of higher education to reduce tuition costs for its residents. Universities now have a financial incentive to prioritize student success. States are also given additional funding for outcomes of student subgroups such as Pell recipients, minority students, and degrees for high-demand fields of STEM.

As enrollment of traditional age college students has declined in recent years, this study can assist the institutions in this study in making sure students persist from the first year to degree completion. In the event a student must stopout, the university will be aware and can take the necessary steps to boost re-enrollment and degree completion. There is no guarantee a student will graduate; however, this study can encourage the institutions motivated to adopt policies and practices that show commitment to enrollment, progress, and student success. Students and institutions will benefit from the findings. Students will be encouraged and supported to finish their degrees and institutions will learn which institutional barriers are impacting student success and degree completion negatively.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following definitions will ease the forthcoming discussion in this review.

**Attrition:** the reduction in number of students that dropout, also known as churn rate (Burke, 2019)

**Dropout:** a student who no longer attends courses in the middle of a term (Schulte, 2015)

**Performance-based funding:** allocation of state funding to colleges based on student outcomes (Li & Kennedy, 2018)

**Persistence:** defined as continued enrollment (or degree completion) at an institution from years two until graduation (Burke, 2019)

**Project Graduate:** statewide program designed for people who have completed 80 or more credit hours, but have not yet received an undergraduate degree (Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education, 2019)

**Retention:** defined as continued enrollment of a student from the first year to the second year (Burke, 2019)

**STEM:** Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (Baum, May, & Payea, 2013)

**Stopout:** a student who did not enroll in a given term and did not re-enroll for the remainder of the academic year or the following academic year and will re-enroll in the future (Schulte, 2015)

### **Limitations**

The quality of the research was heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and may be easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality may be more problematic, and the data collected may be influenced by recollection bias and/or the inclination of participants to provide socially desirable answers. This is particularly true if the research subject is of a potentially sensitive nature or participants feel their behavior, choices, beliefs, etc., are under scrutiny. The goal of this study was to determine potential completion strategies based on knowledge about the specific needs of students from three institutions.

Another limitation of this study is that data collection relied on faculty and administrators' self-reporting their involvement with Project Graduate roughly two years after the project ended for most of the schools who participated in the statewide initiative. It is possible that participants may not want to identify policies that create barriers for students or how their roles impact persistence and graduation. Self-reporting is often perceived, however, as the most accurate way to collect information about student experiences. The final limitation is

lack of representation or generalizability, given the necessarily small sample size. The relatively small sample for this study was from three universities in a single state, and caution should be taken before generalizing the results without further confirmation. Readers should note that this study is not intended to suggest degree completion strategies that can be generalized to different institutions.

## **Methods**

The purpose of the study was to determine the efficacy of Project Graduate, as well as comparable programs and initiatives intended to assist students in the completion of their degree programs. A qualitative research design was employed to investigate the perceived effectiveness of these initiatives. Specifically, faculty and administrators from three different higher education institutions were interviewed regarding their experience with, and perceptions of, Project Graduate (and comparable programs and initiatives) as a strategy for dealing with the stopout phenomenon. Moreover, the study identified the perceived strengths and weaknesses of Project Graduate (and comparable programs and initiatives), together with the implied training and professional development needs necessary to implement them effectively and efficiently. Faculty and administrators play an important role in implementing strategies to increase degree attainment. The narratives provided through the structured interviews also helped illuminate the differences in perceptions between faculty and administrators at three different institutions.

Data was collected from three institutions that participated in Project Graduate. Semi-structured interviews were completed to address the research questions including: (a) knowledge about stopouts, (b) the position of the educator (staff, administrator, advisor, faculty, department head/chair, dean, associate dean, provost, etc.), (c) the number of years of work experience, and (d) the level of involvement at the institution with Project Graduate or comparable degree

completion initiatives. An interview guide was designed by the researcher. The interviews were offered by telephone, Skype, or Zoom<sup>1</sup>. Interview questions aligned with the themes that have been identified through existing research. Questions were open-ended so participants can answer in their own words to collect as much data as possible for this study. Narrative analysis was used to analyze content from interviews focusing on the experiences shared by respondents to answer the research questions. The researcher identified codes and themes for each research question based on the participant responses from the interviews. Once the data was coded and summarized, the researcher identified the relationships among the categories and patterns that suggest generalizations and conclusions.

## **Sampling**

A purposeful sampling approach was used to gather research participants from three institutions. The sample was selected from higher education professionals who were involved in the Project Graduate initiative. It was the aim of this study to include three faculty and three to five administrators from the participating institutions. It is believed that a sample size of 18-24 was sufficient to reach data saturation. One university is labeled as the home institution by the researcher and the others are known as peer institutions identified by the Office of Institutional Research at the home institution. All the institutions are four-year public universities located in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The researcher worked with the participating institutions to identify the faculty and administrators who were involved with the initiative. Participants were contacted by email to participate in the study.

In summary, the purpose of this study was: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would

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<sup>1</sup> In-person interviews were not possible due to Covid-19.

increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies. The intent was to better understand the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how the institution may retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees. The understanding of why students stopout can assist the colleges in intervening early and often and in supporting students so they can earn their degree. As a result of this study, a set of recommendations have been provided to the institutions to assist with accelerating student success to prevent student stopout.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

Student retention is one of the most pressing issues for colleges and universities across the United States. Colleges and universities are scrutinized for high costs, student access, and the producing of measurable outcomes. There has been a succession of degree completion initiatives to address student retention and encourage more students to complete a degree that will over time increase their job earnings, allowing them to better support their families and engage in their communities.

The financial return from earning a college degree and the gaps in earnings by education level have increased over time (Baum, May, & Payea, 2013). A college graduate, who enrolls in an institution of higher education at age 18 and graduates in four years, earns enough by age 36 to make up for not joining the work force for four years. He or she will even make up the amount that was borrowed to cover tuition and fees during college. Individuals with degrees earn more and are more likely than others to be employed. College education increases the likelihood that adults will climb the socioeconomic ladder.

Baum, May, and Payea (2013) assert federal, state, and local governments benefit from college graduates as they see increases in tax revenue. These governments spend less on support programs for college graduates. College educated adults are more likely than other individuals to have health insurance and pension benefits from employers rather than rely on state and federal programs. People with an education are better equipped to adapt to change. Educated people are more likely to accept responsibility for their health and take better care of the society in which they live. If intervention in degree completion does not occur, a decline in educational attainment will continue to be an issue as more-educated older workers retire only to be replaced



by employees who have lower levels of education, causing a decline in the economic health and social fabric of the United States (Moore & Shulock, 2009).

Only half of the U.S. college students enrolled at the undergraduate level eventually graduate, creating a skills gap that threatens the country's economic future; thus, the U.S. needs institutions to step up and improve student success and degree attainment (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Jones, 2015). According to Jones (2015), widespread research has led to the identification of barriers to college completion which are: poorly designed and delivered remedial coursework, a culture that rewards enrollment rather than outcomes, unsuccessful transfer credit processes, undefined choices for students, and an organization that has lost sight of the needs for students who have to balance school with work and family obligations. Strategies in higher education are needed to increase college completion and close degree attainment gaps.

### **Existing Research**

Even though access to college has improved over the last 60 years, the educational system has failed to improve student success (Jones, 2015). The research reflects three sets of factors that affect student persistence: institutional factors, individual attributes, and external barriers. There is also a substantial amount of research regarding degree-completion initiatives offered by postsecondary institutions. Research in each of these four categories will be examined below.

#### **Institutional Factors**

Stopouts can cost universities thousands of dollars in loss of tuition revenue and additional funds in replacement recruiting (Millea, Wills, Elder, & Molina, 2018). Millea et al. (2018) studied factors administrators use to influence student success such as reviewing

residential living, attendance programs, demographic attributes, average class size, and student academic preparation by utilizing longitudinal, student-level data at one midsized university in the southeastern United States from 1998 to 2004. Their findings indicated universities could improve graduation and retention rates by investing in scholarships, smaller class sizes, and financial aid infrastructure.

Tinto (1993) also suggested institutional factors that can encourage student persistence. He believes university personnel should determine which aspects of internal investments and institutional management strategies impact student success rates. Allocation of resources across divisions indicate priorities of the university, which affects student outcomes. Millea et al. (2018) cited sources who have found academic and instructional spending to positively impact graduation and retention rates. An example by Ehrenberg & Zhang (2005) showed spending monies on tenured and tenure-track faculty have a more positive impact on graduation rates when compared to spending on nontenure-track instructors. A study by these researchers provided evidence that the increase use of part-time and full-time nontenure-track faculty adversely affects undergraduate students enrolled at four-year universities by decreasing graduation rates. The most negative impact was found at public institution masters' level when increases in this faculty type were observed in the study. Their results also indicate additional losses in revenue because a student is less likely to take subsequent classes in an a subject when the first course is taught by a part-time faculty member.

Bergman et al. (2014) explored the institutional barriers that affect persistence among students in an adult support program. The authors focused on the extent to which degree completion is affected by student background variables, internal campus environment variables, and external influence variables for the students in the adult degree completion program in their

study. They collected data from 437 adult students enrolled in a Bachelor of Science degree program in Workforce Leadership or Occupational Training and Development from 2004-2011. The population consisted of 1,240 students between the ages of 25 and 67 who were currently or previously enrolled in those programs. An email survey was sent as the first step. Not all the surveys were deliverable; therefore, the population was reduced to 1,083. The response rate was 40% (437 of 1,083). An exploratory instrument, known as the Adult Learner Persistence Study (ALPS), was used to collect data on variables thought to impact degree completion.

The findings show no significant differences in persistence outcomes by student demographics (Bergman et al., 2014). The higher the degree goal of the students, the higher the persistence outcome. Persistence was lower for those who felt their work and classes conflicted. Also, the more credit hours the students took in a semester, the better the outcomes achieved by the students. Bergman et al. (2014) found campus environments played a significant role in student persistence rates. If a student felt a sense of belonging and connection to the faculty, the chance of persisting increased by 63%. A supportive campus environment will help students overcome challenges to earn a degree.

Scott, Miller, and Morris (2015) report that distance to the college is not a significant factor in a student's decision when choosing a community college for a postsecondary education. Their research did report a study by Perna that contradicted their results (Perna, 2000 as cited in Scott, Miller, & Morris, 2015). Perna's study found that 50% of students in their sample reported how many miles he or she drives to and from school each day affects their choice in enrolling in college. These students considered the price of gas and car maintenance to the benefits of earning a college degree. Clearly, students weigh the cost versus benefits when considering enrollment or re-enrollment.

Xu (2017) researched student experience in college by using a questionnaire as a method to better understand how student persistence is affected by the environment of the college. Xu supported this study with data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Digest of Educational Statistics (2014) and the previous research of Tinto (1975-2006). Data were collected from full-time undergraduate students from a single research-extensive university with the use of the online survey. The study had three goals: demonstrate institution-specific needs related to student retention, examine differences in retention factors across academic colleges, and discuss potential interventions at the school. The article clearly defines the methods, participants, instrument procedures, data analysis, and results. The results indicate that both academic and social dimensions contribute to student integration into college. Several other experiences from the students were reported, including the lack of resources to pay for college, lack of commitment to degree completion, psychological readiness for engagement, and intention to drop out.

### **Individual Attributes**

Individual attributes influence students' success in college (Millea et al., 2018). These include behaviors, motivation, academic preparation, demographic factors, and family characteristics, specifically whether a parent or sibling has earned a degree. Roughly 2.8 million students begin at two- and four-year programs across public, private, online, and for-profit institutions (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). While these students are motivated to start college, a college ID card, textbooks, nor attending classes is enough for them to complete a degree. Johnson and Rochkind (2009) indicated several studies have tried to determine what exactly prevents students from finishing. Some possible explanations are rising tuition, poor academic preparation, and study habits, lack of student support and advising systems in higher education,

being forced to attend when they didn't want to, and professors and advisors who only see completion as a student's responsibility.

Johnson and Rochkind (2009) also point out that research provide solutions to some college, no degree problem including financial support and student services and revamping institutional policies and programming to better support students to complete a degree or certificate. A study by these researchers tested the assumptions that educators make about college students today and why students fail to graduate. The goal was to determine solutions to increase the likelihood for a student to complete the degree. Their findings support seeking ways to make part-time attendance more viable by assisting students with more financial aid and access to healthcare. Their findings indicate that participants understand the value of education and how a degree would change their lives.

DeBerard, Spielman, & Julka (2004) reported coping skills, healthy choices regarding smoking and drinking, and social/parental support promotes higher academic performance. Studies listed in the review of the literature found in the Bergman et al. (2014) article indicated adults who have earned a degree lead healthier lifestyles and get more involved in their communities. Degree attainment also showed implications for a person's social and psychological development.

Bers & Schuetz (2014) studied the community college population to understand more about student behavior and perception. Community colleges have an opportunity to focus student success initiatives from the first year to throughout the remaining college years. The literature in their article focused on research by Tinto (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005). Tinto's research reported fewer than 25% of all students drop out because of academic

failure, whereas 75% of students stopout because of a lack of fitting in and failing to adjust to the rigid structure of college.

### **External Barriers**

According to Bers & Schuetz (2014), students provide a list of barriers to returning to college such as work and family obligations, financial pressures which may be worse if the student has previous financial holds due to unpaid balances for tuition or defaulted student loans, fear of unknown computer technology and not belonging, institutional obstacles like academic probation from previous attendance, and/or problems getting previous coursework or work experiences translated into college credit. Many students report having to cover the cost of tuition and fees without help from their families. Also, they work over 20 hours each week while attending school at least part-time. Over half the students who participated in the Johnson and Rochkind (2009) study report they left college because they needed to work more. Over 30% of students who had not earned a degree reported their student loans needed to be repaid. The participants suggest the need for more financial aid opportunities and evening and weekend course offerings to accommodate working adults.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also address financial implications as a barrier to student performance, reporting that need-based financial aid was beneficial for student persistence and degree completion. Loans typically show little to no effect on retention and graduation, while grant and scholarship aid show positive indicators on those rates. Millea et al. (2018) report students who stopout indicate their financial situation was a factor in their decision to leave school. Their study findings suggest colleges need to invest in smaller class sizes and allocate resources to reduce financial constraints of its students.

Winograd, Verkuilen, Weingarten, and Walker (2018) examined academic outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who participated in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at a selective four-year public college in the Northeast. Also, the authors offer policy recommendations designed to enhance academic persistence among EOP students to timely degree completion. This study used quasi-experimental methods to compare 121 EOP students with 964 non-EOP students to determine program effectiveness. The findings indicate provisionally admitted EOP students earned comparable first semester grades and had similar first-year retention and persistence rates to students with far higher admission scores. The EOP students earned more credit in their first semester and had higher transfer rates from two-year to four-year colleges when reviewed at a three-year follow-up.

Students are forced to drop out of school to support themselves when they can no longer balance the stresses of school and work (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). More than a third of students in a study by these researchers report that even with a fully paid tuition bill and textbooks, it would be difficult to return to school. Many students need to work full-time to make ends meet. There is lack of government support or higher education programs that address the issue of students who must balance going to school and punching a time clock to support themselves.

Furthermore, roughly 6 in 10 students who left college in the study report paying for college without any support from family (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). National statistics support the notion that students who leave college with no degree come from less privileged backgrounds (Clery, 2009). So many students report that they have accrued student loan debt. This debt will need to be repaid even though students do not have the financial advantage that a

college degree affords. Unfortunately, they are in the worst-case scenario of no diploma, yet college loans to repay.

### **Degree Completion Initiatives**

Institutions that are showing the most success in college completion share common elements, including extensive support from the trustees, administrators, and faculty who are committed to increasing completion rates (Collett, 2013). Analysis of successful and withdrawn students help colleges establish advantageous retention strategies (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). Thirty-eight million of the 162.3 million people in the United States workforce have some college but no degree. Postsecondary education is required for many entry-level positions; however, there is a growing need for more college graduates. With that said, colleges must work harder to determine why students are leaving without earning a degree.

Project Win-Win, hereinafter Win-Win, was designed to locate students from associate degree-granting institutions who had earned over 60 credit hours but had not earned a degree (Wheatle, Taylor, Bragg, Ajinkya, & Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2017). Win-Win used the National Student Clearinghouse and state longitudinal data to exclude students who transferred or completed degrees at other institutions. The remaining population was reviewed by the schools to determine whether an associate degree for which they qualified could be retroactively awarded. The initiative also required schools to contact students who were within nine to 12 hours of earning the degree. These students were encouraged to return to the institution to complete the degree. Institutions who participated in Win-Win re-enrolled over 1,700 students during its deployment. As a result, many schools found new institutional degree-awarding policies that eliminated barriers to degree completion. Win-Win awarded over 4,500 associate degrees over 60 institutions.



Credit When It's Due was another degree completion initiative for students to earn a degree for which they were qualified (Wheatle et al., 2017). This initiative allowed students who were enrolled at a four-year college to complete the remaining credits needed to earn an associate degree while pursuing the baccalaureate. The students would have to transfer the credit back to the community college in which they started their college careers. This initiative was designed to help community colleges better align with four-year partner schools. As a result, institutions developed reverse credit transfer practices and eliminated graduation fees and forms often found to be barriers for degree completion. Participating schools developed better reverse credit transfer policies, procedures, and best practices for system-wide adoption. Over 500 institutions participate in the Credit When It's Due initiative, which is still in existence today. It has resulted in more than 16,000 Associate degrees and counting.

After Win-Win and Credit When It's Due, several degree reclamation policies and procedures were developed and implemented to assist institutions and states to work towards their degree attainment goals (Wheatle et al., 2017). These initiatives benefitted institutions and society. Both initiatives led to gains in completion, data collection and tracking, expanded student services, and improved administrative systems. The community benefitted as more citizens have degrees to enter the workforce. Wheatle et al. (2017) reported future plans to scale for degree reclamation must include collaboration between institutions, state education agencies, and local, regional, and nation partnerships. Institutions must also attract, incorporate, and support the growth to serve larger numbers of underrepresented students as part of their efforts. Kentucky was not one of the 17 states to participate in Win-Win or Credit When It's Due; however, they designed their own program to address some college, no degree population.

Project Graduate was a statewide “comebacker” initiative designed to recruit, retain, and graduate returning adult learners with 80 or more credit hours but no bachelor’s degree (Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education, 2019). Prior to fall 2011, students were required to have 90 or more hours to participate in Project Graduate. The number was changed to 80 based on market demand. The goal of Project Graduate is to increase bachelor’s degree completion of Kentucky’s former students with 80 or more credit hours. It is a collaboration among all public four-year institutions in Kentucky. All of Kentucky’s public four-year institutions have participated in Project Graduate since inception in 2007. The institutions are Eastern Kentucky University, Kentucky State University, Morehead State University, Murray State University, Northern Kentucky University, University of Kentucky, University of Louisville and Western Kentucky University.

The primary components of the program include the following: campus action plans that outline the high-touch student incentives and services designed to recruit and retain students; highly skilled Project Graduate “advocates” who serve adult students at each campus; and a Project Graduate team to implement campus-specific action plans (Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education, 2019). The incentives and student services offered to prospective and current students vary by campus, and include application fee waivers, priority enrollment, degree audits, credit for prior learning, tuition assistance, simplified admissions paperwork, personal advising, one-on-one academic advising, career counseling, and study support skills.

State data analyzed by Kentucky’s Council for Postsecondary Education in 2007 showed more than 300,000 Kentucky adults between the ages of 25 and 50 had some college credit from a Kentucky public institution, but no degree (Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education, 2019). A closer look revealed 233,000 of them were between the ages of 25 and 40. Even more

compelling, more than 7,000 of those former students had earned 90 or more credit hours at one of Kentucky's public four-year institutions but had stopped out before earning their degrees. Each participating institution developed a campus action plan to provide essential, high-touch services for returning adult learners. Additionally, the plans identified a Project Graduate campus response team and a one-point-of contact, or "advocate," to ensure former students who respond and qualify can take advantage of incentives and support services so they can be well on their way to becoming successful students and graduates.

Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) research further supports the notion that student engagement is critical to student success. Institutions can build academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to promote student engagement. Examples of best practices for student success in the first year include student orientation, intrusive advising, placement testing, required remedial courses early in students' college careers, and college success courses.

Bers and Schuetz (2014) completed a study focusing on "nearbies," whom they define as successful students who are close to degree completion yet leave higher education. The study focused on nearbies at a suburban community college during 2012. The authors offered an online or telephone survey to 359 students who met the study criteria further defined in the article. The response rate was roughly 21%. Transcripts were reviewed for 20 of the participants who were chosen by random selection and a focus group was formed from the participants to study the population further. Their findings show students have several reasons for leaving, show behaviors at odds with their adopted value of earning a certificate or degree, and desire support and reassurance throughout their time at the school. The relationships they form give them an added sense of belonging. The findings from the focus group referenced college choice, academic goals, college experiences, reasons for stopout, and recommendations

for improving college support for degree completion in the future. The study relied on data from the National Student Clearinghouse. The survey results provided information on student perception and behavior but lacked any results to assist the authors with finding interventions. The study is limited to a small population in a single institution; therefore, its generalizability is limited. It does, however, explain some student behaviors better than what was known before this research.

Five specific strategies have been reported to lead to transformational results across the nation to attempt to ensure more Americans are earning degrees or other credentials of value (Jones, 2015). First, performance-based funding provides institutions with state dollars based on credit accumulation, remedial students' success in gateway courses, and degree completion. This is much different from the previous focus on enrollment in courses. This change in funding has forced colleges to focus on student success reform. Second, co-requisite remediation assists students with additional support needed when placed into developmental education. The student is permitted to complete college-level courses with additional academic resources. Third, the 15 to Finish campaign encourages students to graduate in a timely manner. Research shows that students who prolong their education are more likely to dropout when life gets in the way. Fourth, a structured schedule permits a student to predict course requirements and arrange a schedule that accounts for a work schedule and childcare arrangement. Students can predict being in class, for example, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. daily. Last, guided pathways are another strategy for student success. A guided pathway is a structured degree plan that ensures on-time graduation. It is understood that if a student follows the plan of 15 credit hours each semester and successfully passes the coursework, then the student will graduate in four years as promised.

Students need options to allow for flexible schedules and assistance with working and attending school at the same time (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). Students who have not completed college support programming that increases financial aid for part-time students and the need for evening and weekend classes that allow students to work while going to school. A decrease in tuition costs are also needed. Oriano (as cited in Collett, 2013) reports colleges must inform students of the expectations from the first day and assist them with developing a written academic plan. Students need encouragement to know why they belong. Higher education most often falls short in making sure students fit in. In doing so, colleges need to recognize they must stop doing some things just because they did them in the past. Colleges need not be afraid of upsetting people when the imperative to reallocate resources is necessary to have the greatest impact on the largest number of students.

The literature review summarized previous research on the reasons that students stop out of colleges and universities with only some college and no degree. The research reflected three factors that affect student persistence: institutional factors, individual attributes, and external barriers. It outlined a few of the degree completion initiatives offered by postsecondary institutions that are contributing to degree attainment goals set by many states and across the nation. In conclusion, college and universities must use degree completion initiatives to increase student persistence and graduation rates. The demands of faculty and administrators who employ these initiatives will require additional training to ensure these initiatives are fully implemented and sustained for the years to come. The methodology of this study will be discussed in Chapter three, which will include the research design and data source, instrumentation, and the data collection process.

## **Chapter Three: Methods**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies. The intent was to better understand the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how the institution may retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees. This chapter contains an explanation of this study's methodology, including research method and design, population, sampling, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Due to the nature of the study, a qualitative design and methodology were effective in answering the research questions. "Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meanings of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem," such as faculty and administrators on degree completion initiatives (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews was used to determine the essence of the shared experiences of the participants and to fill in the research gap.

### **Research Design**

The methodology used in this study involved qualitative research that is rooted in the views and perceptions of participants (McMillan, 2016). Qualitative research uses verbal reports rather than numbers. Qualitative research is often used when the subject is complex, and when to understand the subject, going directly to the people involved is the best way to explore their issues and voices (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, "qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2007, p.

37). The process of beginning a qualitative research study requires the identification of a problem or issue which needed to be studied. As identified by the purpose statement, the issue of this study was to better understand the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how the institution may retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees. Because the literature is lacking regarding the voice of faculty and administrator's perspective and on the degree completion initiative of Project Graduate, a qualitative study provided the opportunity to speak directly with those involved and gather data about their experience.

Interviewing was considered an appropriate data gathering method for asking questions orally to participants. The responses were recorded. Interviewing allowed the interviewer to clarify questions by participants and permitted follow up questions by the interviewer. In this study, the interviewer is the researcher. Interviews allow for depth and richness of information. Themes emerged from participants who share experiences from their participation in the Project Graduate initiative. Each participant was emailed a copy of their interview responses along with the researcher's interpretation of its meaning. Participants were to inform the researcher of any misrepresentations in the analysis.

### **Site Selection**

The data collection for this study took place at three, public universities located in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The institutions were Western Kentucky University (WKU), University of Louisville (UofL), and Murray State University (MSU). They were selected because of important characteristics that they share: participation in Project Graduate, commonalities of location, student-centered mission, and student enrollment size. Each university selected had years of experience working with students who were near degree

completion whether independently or when under guidance from degree completion initiatives. Another criterion used to select the universities was the willingness of the university staff to identify faculty and staff who were knowledgeable with Project Graduate. The student-centered missions appear to influence the way that faculty advise and engage with students since more emphasis is placed on guiding students through the entire college experience. All the institutions expect their full-time faculty to serve as academic advisors to students.

### **University Descriptions**

*University No. 1.* Western Kentucky University (WKU), home of the Hilltoppers, is the home institution represented in this study (Western Kentucky University, n.d.). It was founded by the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 1906, though its roots reach back a quarter-century earlier. The hilltop campus is a place of beauty and friendliness. WKU is in Bowling Green, Kentucky, a city with a population of more than 60,000 approximately 110 miles south of Louisville and 65 miles north of Nashville. WKU's Regional Campuses are in Glasgow, Owensboro, and Elizabethtown-Fort Knox. Western Kentucky University is part of the public Kentucky postsecondary education system, which includes eight four-year institutions and a community and technical college system comprised of 16 institutions. By statute, Western Kentucky University is governed by its Board of Regents. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) serves as a coordinating board for the system. Western Kentucky University is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges to award associate, baccalaureate, masters, specialist, and doctorate degrees. WKU provides students of all backgrounds with rigorous academic programs in education, the liberal arts and sciences, the health sciences, and business, with emphasis at the baccalaureate and masters levels, complemented by relevant associate and doctoral level



programs. Enrollment at WKU dropped to 19,461 in fall 2018, after nine consecutive years over 20,000. Undergraduates comprise 88% of the total student enrollment. Its mission statement asserted that it prepares students of all backgrounds to be productive, engaged, and socially responsible citizen-leaders of a global society. It is poised to enrich the quality of life for those within its reach.

***University No. 2.*** The University of Louisville (UofL) is a public research university in Louisville, Kentucky (University of Louisville, n.d.). It is part of the Kentucky state university system. When founded in 1798, it was the first city-owned public university in the United States and one of the first universities chartered west of the Allegheny Mountains. The University of Louisville is a research university of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education's State-Supported Institutions located in Kentucky's largest metropolitan area. It was a municipally supported public institution for many decades prior to joining the university system in 1970. The university has three campuses. The 287-acre Belknap Campus is three miles from downtown Louisville and houses eight of the university's 12 colleges and schools. The Health Sciences Center is situated in downtown Louisville's medical complex and houses the university's health-related programs and the University of Louisville Hospital. The 243-acre Shelby Campus is in eastern Jefferson County. UofL is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges to award associate, bachelor, master, specialist, doctoral, and first-professional degrees (D.M.D., J.D., M.D.). Student enrollment for fall 2019 was 22,684. Its mission statement focuses on the pursuit of excellence and inclusiveness in its work to educate and serve its community through teaching, practicing and applying research and scholarship, and providing engaged service and outreach to improve the quality of life for local and global communities.

**University No. 3.** Murray State University is a public university in Murray, Kentucky (Murray State University, n.d.). Located in the Jackson Purchase lake area of west Kentucky, Murray State University (MSU) is a state-assisted comprehensive university with five academic colleges, two schools, and a library. The university's 236-acre main campus is in Murray, a city of 16,600. In addition to the main campus in Calloway County in southwestern Kentucky, Murray State operates extended campuses offering upper level and graduate courses in Paducah, Hopkinsville, Madisonville, and Henderson. MSU offers relevant undergraduate and graduate degree programs with core studies in the liberal arts and sciences, leading to degrees from certificates to advanced practice doctorates that prepare students for success. Founded in 1922, the university has grown from an enrollment of 202 students to over 10,000 in previous years. MSU has been continuously accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) since 1928. MSU is also one of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education's State-Supported Institutions. Student enrollment for fall 2018 was 9,466. Its mission statement emphasizes placing the highest priority on student learning and excellent teaching by blending educational opportunities with student-teacher interactions. As a public comprehensive university, it is dedicated to diversity, global awareness, and intellectual interest by through student engagement with faculty, staff, and community partners for collaborative scholarship, creative activity, and research.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were formulated to provide focus for this study:

1. What significant factors affect degree completion among the students enrolled at an institution?

2. What academic and administrative policies potentially interfere with a students' persistence to graduation?
3. What faculty and staff resources are offered to help students in completing their degree requirements?
4. What faculty and staff resources are needed to help students in completing their degree requirements?

### **Sample Population**

This section of the chapter will provide information on the target population, as well as sampling procedures and anticipated sample. The study population refers to the individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Research participants were identified after an initial email (Appendix C) was sent to professional contacts at each university to determine who was eligible for the study, how long they worked at their institution, and must have participated in the Project Graduate initiative in some capacity as a staff or faculty member. Aside from faculty or administrator status and involvement with Project Graduate at the select universities, no other criteria were relevant for determining membership in the sample population for this study. After the researcher identified potential participants at each university, the researcher sent emails (Appendix D) asking for their willingness to participate. The process used for the study was purposeful sampling. This process was appropriate for qualitative study as the selected participants provided the insight to the reasons for stopout and potential strategies that can be offered by institutions to prevent stopout.

## **Sampling Procedure**

The main purpose of drawing a sample from specific populations was to gain transparent and reflective meaning of the study. Purposeful sampling permits the researcher to select participants nonrandomly because they have the same characteristics across the institutions. There was a clear reason for participation in the study (McMillan, 2016). Faculty member representation was essential to this study as students receive academic advising by faculty members during the Project Graduate initiative. Specific roles at the university were represented in the study. Those roles were represented by staff in the following offices: registrar, financial aid, academic advising, project graduate coordinator, and other similar roles as identified from the professional contacts at the university that provided the names to the researcher.

## **Research Participants**

Research participants should be purposefully selected in qualitative research that assist the researcher to gain a better understanding of the problem and research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). At each university, the researcher selected three full-time faculty members and three to five administrators to participate in interviews for the study which resulted in a total of 18-24 research participants. Selecting research participants included discussions with professional contacts at each university to determine who was eligible for the dissertation study, how long they worked at their institution, and faculty rank or administrative title. The researcher made efforts to select participants who represented a variety of expertise, years of service, and faculty rank or administrative roles. After potential participants at each university were identified, the researcher sent emails (see Appendix D) to them about participating in the study. Participants were asked to sign the informed consent agreement (Appendix E) electronically prior to the interview.

## **Instrumentation**

The key instrument used in this study is the researcher who collected data through interviewing participants. Qualitative researchers may use an instrument, but often it is designed by the researcher using open-ended questions (Brinkmann, 2018). The researcher did not use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers. The researcher was responsible for data collection as well as data analysis. The researcher was responsible for initiation, supervision, collection, and organization of the sources of data. Even though errors and bias can occur naturally by humans, the researcher avoided both by following protocol for data collection as described in this chapter. Later, this chapter will provide procedural steps that were followed to minimize risk to participants. The steps followed to ensure data validity are also described in this chapter.

The researcher conducted individual interviews using an instrument that consisted of open-ended questions. The questions were organized in a semi-structured format (see Appendix B). The semi-structured format permitted participants enough of an opportunity to be flexible to discuss experience and perspective as it naturally emerges during the interview (Brinkmann, 2018). This interview structure kept the researcher on task. It safeguarded that interviews were consistent and covered all key aspects of the research as indicated by Brinkmann (2018). An interview guide, developed by the researcher, included several defined questions that related to the research questions of this study. Probing questions were also used when necessary to collect additional data that addressed the problem and research questions as identified by this study. Additionally, the interview guide created consistency during the interviews by ensuring the same set of questions along with similar phrasing was used.

Interview questions were revised following the beginning of the study. The interviews consisted of 10 questions. An additional set of demographic questions provided information on the experiences and background of the participants. The interview questions focused on perceptions of faculty and administrators on Project Graduate, institutional barriers to degree completion, and implementation of policies and services that promote degree completion initiatives at institutions of higher education. Table 1 below provides a crosswalk of interview questions to the research questions they sought to address.

Table 1

Crosswalk of Interview Questions to Research Questions

Interview Question	Research Question
1. In your opinion, why do students stopout?	1
2. Do students who stopout at your institution experience any different barriers than what the literature suggests as institutional, individual, and external?	1
3. What are the barriers or challenges that may hinder a student's persistence to graduation?	2
4. What specific challenges have you encountered within your institution with degree completion initiatives implementation? Probe – how about procedures and/or policies that might interfere with students' persistence?	2
5. What resources and/or training are available to faculty and staff for degree completion initiatives?	3
6. What training or professional development would be beneficial for faculty and administrators to make them an effective participant in degree completion initiatives or better assist a student to persist through graduation?	4
7. What tools or resources do you need to work with students who stopout at your institution?	4
8. What will it take for your institution to make degree completion initiatives sustainable as a natural part of the educational process?	3,4
9. What are your thoughts about the role of a centralized unit (office dedicated to degree completion) or a specific designated person (such as a Project Graduate coordinator) to accomplish degree completion goals at an institution?	3,4
10. Any other information that you think would be valuable to this interview and/or study?	Varies

## **Data Collection**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicate a researcher will follow a set of steps for data collection that include setting the parameters for the study through sampling and recruitment, collecting information through unstructured or semi-structured interviews, and establishing the procedure for recording information. In the qualitative interview, the researcher conducted telephone interviews that involved unstructured and open-ended questions. These questions produced the views and opinions from the research participants. Interviews allowed participants to provide historical information.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) identify the interview protocol consists of an introduction, the interview questions, or phrases, and closing instructions. The interview protocol aided in data collection. The protocol was roughly two pages in length leaving enough space for notes and quotes from the participants. It provided the list of questions along with space to record handwritten notes from the interview. In addition, the interviews were recorded in case the researcher needed to revisit the recording after the interview.

## **Data Analysis**

Narrative analysis was used to analyze content from interview dialogues focusing on the experiences shared by respondents to answer the research questions. It involved grouping and dissecting the data as well as compiling it back together. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe five steps to the data analysis process. The researcher in this study followed these five steps as outlined below.

Step one is to organize and prepare the data for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193). In this step, the researcher transcribes the interviews. Step two requires researchers to

read and review the data from step one. It is the first opportunity for a researcher to reflect on the overall meaning. Writing notes in the margins of the transcriptions might be necessary at this step. Step three is the coding of all data. The researcher will identify codes and themes for each research question based on the participant responses from the interviews. This coding process organizes the data by bracketing chunks and assigning a word to represent a category in the margins. Step four relies on the coding process to create descriptions and themes. Codes will be developed from the descriptions. These codes provide themes for the research study. The final step is to represent the description and themes. This step concludes with the narrative passage which is a detailed description of the several themes along with any subthemes, perspectives from individuals, or discussions of interconnected themes.

### **Conclusion**

A goal of this study was to aid institutional leaders in the development of policies and procedures that promote degree completion by understanding administration and faculty perspectives. Qualitative methods were selected because it allowed for exploration of perspectives and attitudes. Specifically, qualitative methodology was followed in this study. Data were gathered from thirty participants at three universities through interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The next step was to organize the data into themes using field notes to help prevent bias. This chapter described the methodology used by providing details about the research questions, research design, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter four presents the results of the data analysis.



## **Chapter Four: Presentation and Data Analysis**

### **Introduction**

This chapter contains an explanation of this study's findings and analysis of data collected. Multiple stakeholders from three universities were interviewed for this study to gain insight into the various perspectives from the entire campus community. The purpose of this study was: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies. The intent was to better understand the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how the institution may retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees.

### **Data Collection**

Since this study explored faculty and administrators' perspectives from three universities located in Kentucky, the researcher interviewed and collected documents from faculty and administrators from each of the three schools. The researcher extracted the data for this dissertation from the phone and zoom interviews that were conducted with the participants. Phone and zoom interviews were necessary for social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, in-person interviews were not an option due to safety protocols. Most faculty and staff worked remotely as in-person classes transitioned to online modalities. All 18 participants were interviewed individually. Zoom interviews were conducted with two faculty members and four administrators. Phone interviews were conducted with the remaining six faculty members and six administrators.

Interviews were recorded with permission from each participant. The researcher transcribed the interviews and contacted the participants via email if the researcher needed more

clarification or if the researcher had additional questions following the interview. The interview transcripts were available to the participants, which allowed for member checking and trustworthiness of the qualitative data. The follow up also allowed for collection of any documents that were referenced during the interviews. For example, one participant provided data that she collected on the reasons that students stopout at her institution. Once transcriptions were completed, all audio recordings were subsequently deleted. Digital files and data for this study were securely stored according to protocols required by the IRB.

### Participant Characteristics

The study was conducted at three universities in Kentucky: Western Kentucky University, Murray State University, and University of Louisville. The study population of 18 participants included eight faculty members and 10 administrators. The required criteria for the study participants was direct involvement with Project Graduate or similar degree completion initiative that took place between 2008 to present. Purposeful sampling dictated the sample frame. The demographics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Participants' Demographics

Category	Gender	Years in Higher Education	Years at School	University
Faculty	F	20	20	MSU
Faculty	F	12	4	UoL
Faculty	M	28	25	WKU
Faculty	F	20	9	WKU
Faculty	M	20	20	WKU
Faculty	M	21	15	UoL
Faculty	M	14	2	UoL
Faculty	F	16	22	WKU
Administrator	F	24	24	MSU
Administrator	M	33	33	UoL
Administrator	F	18	4	UoL
Administrator	F	11	11	MSU
Administrator	F	4	4	UoL

Administrator	M	15	12	UoL
Administrator	M	4	4	WKU
Administrator	F	30	30	WKU
Administrator	M	13	1	WKU
Administrator	F	27	15	MSU

As shown in Table 2, four male and four female faculty members participated in the study. Four male and six female administrators participated in the study. The faculty's academic fields varied broadly, but duplication of an academic area was unavoidable. The academic fields include interdisciplinary students, organizational leadership, and general studies. The administrators represent various offices across campus, including the registrar's office, academic advising, and transfer student services. The faculty experience in higher education ranged from 12 years to 28 years, for an average of more than 18.88 years of higher education. Likewise, the administrators' experience in higher education ranged from 4 years to 33 years, for an average of 17.9 years in higher education. Table 2 shows years of service at their respective institution. Participants shared their experience and background working with degree completion initiatives, primarily Project Graduate. Participants brought a wealth of experience to this study, with most having direct roles in degree completion initiatives on their campus.

### **Major Findings**

Information collected from the demographic questions was presented in the previous paragraphs. The interview data includes Research Questions 1-4. Interview questions mapped to specific research questions can be found in Table 1. All data were transcribed and organized into faculty or administrator responses for each research question. Data were grouped into reoccurring issues by color code and later divided into themes during the analysis phase. Themes were developed as interviews from each university were merged by participant category. The themes represented repeated statements from the interviews. The information that follows is

the themes that emerged for each research question. The supporting responses for each theme are grouped into their respective category of faculty or administrators.

### **Research Question 1: What significant factors affect degree completion among the students enrolled at an institution?**

#### **Institutional Barriers**

The first theme to emerge was institutional barriers, which consist of the policies and procedures that are intermingled within colleges and universities that prevent students from completing their degrees. These include the lack of night, weekend, or online classes and difficulty reaching support services, various campus offices, and advising staff. Other factors mentioned include academic advising, faculty support, financial aid and cost, and flexible course options. The campus environment was mentioned in responses by faculty members who participated in this study. Participants also reported the sense of belonging and a connection to faculty as institutional barriers.

Administrators shared more extended responses and support as to why students stopout. The main reasons noted by this group were financial, personal, and time. Each participant had varying reasons for why financial barriers were the most significant factor. Some administrators revealed rising tuition costs created challenges for students, while other administrators specified students needed to exit college to earn money to support their families.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

“I think it is a combination of barriers: lack of progress – either they are struggling in classes or they are misadvised and find they have paid for hours they don’t really need.”

“Let me respond by providing an actual example of an institutional barrier as encountered by a student. The student was bright and artistically talented. But his ability to do well rarely

showed up in traditional ways (tests and papers—he was more hands-on). He also had few resources and did not want student debt, so he would stop and start school as he accumulated dollars to pay for the next set of courses. His advisor steered him to a semester’s worth of courses that he later found out would not count toward his degree. This mistake cost him dearly, but his perception was that beyond a sorry, no one offered to make the mistake right. That was the last straw for him, and he never returned.”

“Institutional barriers exist with course and credit hour requirements that are too strict.”

“Bad advising and faculty who are unsupportive.”

“Finding a peer group, be it the Greek system; religious organizations; residence life group; or study groups can help here as can good teachers, advisors, and administrators being proactive. But, feeling like an imposter or not belonging leads to various issues related to isolation and even more serious mental health issues. Having people and human support is critical to establishing students’ sense of belonging and desire to be a good citizen of the university.”

“Sometimes they just find they don’t feel at home here. Sometimes, they have an experience that puts them off.”

“We need don’t offer enough night or online classes or academic programs that can be completed in modular structures that offer classes in seven or eight-week sessions.”

“I don’t think we do a very good job of helping students understand how their degrees will help them in the real world, so when challenges arise or debt accumulates, they quit.”

“I think there’s a perceived stigma that adult students internalize, and some never get past it to be able to enroll again to finish up. For those who do try to re-enter, they’re faced with

websites, literature, and general messaging that is focused to 18-year-old students or their parents.”

*Administrators.* Administrators comments follow.

“Tuition changes can throw a wrench into things since they tend to plan out every penny, so additional fees or increases that were not factored into their plan can affect their enrollment.”

“I’ve noticed that when it comes to gen eds, active duty will temporarily suspend enrollment at our school to complete these through UMUC or other institutions that are more flexible but return to finish out the degree with just the major courses.”

“One issue may be that many of our students are distance learners so they do not have in-person access to many of the offices that they would if they live closer to campus.”

“Improper or lacksadaisal advising.”

“We haven’t created a system of higher education that is conducive to the working adult. Your 22 to 80 are going to come your majority, so we need night classes, we need more online offerings weekend classes, we need to create academic programs completed in a non-traditional structure. The 18- to 22-year-old students are going to become your minority. The larger four-year flagship universities will continue to focus on those while the rest of us focus on all the others.”

“Academic holds for students with low GPAs create institutional barriers for students. We regularly see students who get academically suspended and lack the academic support from faculty to advisors to know how to navigate the appeal process to return. Most of these students will need academic and financial aid appeals dealing with separate offices and appeal processes.”

“Students experience many more challenges when they return to the institution. These included getting accounts (network and email passwords), financial aid and financing in general, transfer credits, reaching advisors, etc.”

“The longer students wait to return the harder it is for them to return. They are less likely to jump through hoops or put in the energy necessary to overcome any barriers. These students will just give up and decide it isn’t worth their efforts.”

“lack of true mentoring especially for underrepresented and underserved populations. I believe true faculty mentoring would go a long way toward helping here.

“non-traditional students being unable to find classes to complete their degree in a mode through which they can find success; not everyone wants all online classes because they work all day. We used to offer many night classes across the university; no longer true.”

### **Individual Attributes**

The second theme to emerge was individual attributes. Faculty participants noted individual factors that affect degree completion among the students enrolled at their respective institutions. These include behaviors, motivation, academic preparation, demographic factors, and family characteristics. These can also be known as situational barriers. Almost all faculty participants identified financial barriers as a reason that students stopout.

A common view among participants was that the active learning environment and content relevance affect degree completion. Students need to make a connection to how the degree can affect their life. The emotional component must be considered as institutions understand why more students are stopping out each year. Students, who stopout, fail to understand how course content directly relates to the workforce.

**Faculty.** Faculty comments follow.

“Also, worth noting, many non-traditional students don’t take enough classes to qualify for financial aid so finances can be a huge challenge to completing their degree.”

“They can no longer afford it.”

“I believe the reasons students stopout are unique to each student situation. However, there are some overarching reasons including financial issues, family obligations, health, mental or physical issues, and job or employee obligations.”

“Expenses, primarily tuition, books, extra fees, childcare, etc.”

“Time. Money. Energy. The three are hard to disentangle. Let me explain further my simplified way of assessing a student’s likelihood of persistence and success. If a student has all three (time, money, energy), they tend to persist. If they have two of the three, they usually will persist with encouragement and assistance. But, if they lack two of the three or all three, the path forward is extremely difficult. Money is the easy answer, but it is often more complicated than that, usually related to factors of time or energy such as running out of funds; working a job; family obligations; etc.”

“Many first-generation or underprepared students are fearful that they are not good enough. When challenges arise and no one steps in to support them, their fears confirm to them that they aren’t really college material.”

“Under-preparedness or perceptions they will not be successful.”

“Sometimes they are not ready, meaning they are underprepared for their courses.”

“I think it is a combination of barriers. The lack of resources is the main barrier.”

“Costs are too high. Financial aid decreases, particularly for part-time students, and tuition increases.”



“Some students have a fear of failure, some lack the availability of financial resources. Both men and women have responsibilities in the home; therefore, the financial burden keeps students from continuing their educational journey. Students often feel uneasy and lack the self-confidence in themselves to be successful in the classroom.”

“Active learning environments are and have been determined to be key predictors of persistence for adults that are taking a program. And what that truly means is that if people can make connections to recover from their own perspective or what they must do as far as ambitions and their life they will stay enrolled. If not, they are potentially going to be gone again because there are so many competing factors. If it doesn't make sense, they won't be back. What's the point? You know, another shiny object over there somewhere, and I think too if we don't meet the needs of where they are and what their expectation is then they'll just take their money elsewhere.”

“Nontraditional students consider college during times of transition such as divorce or change in jobs so as their personal lives get back on track the students are likely to stop out. It is sometimes a pattern that repeats itself for a number of students.”

“Not being able to see the relevance of what they are taking to preparing them for future job opportunities.”

***Administrators.*** Administrators comments follow.

“Our two main reasons are financial and homesickness.”

“At our school, poor performance issues and lack of funds for traditional college students are main reasons.”

“For others, they get overwhelmed or just do not think they are capable of getting through the coursework.”

“Students do not feel they belong to campus. They do not reach out to academic advisors and fail to connect with their faculty members.”

“Students suffer from diagnosed mental health, anxiety, and depression issues which creates individual barriers for students to be successful in courses. If they are unable to be successful in classes, they are not likely to graduate. The students that feel like they don’t belong lead to additional feelings of isolation and even more serious mental health issues.”

“I would point to the level of education actually received in High School (45th in the nation for completers; anecdotal – number of “developmental” classes students had to take and still have to take even though our institution “did away with” those through changed admission standards - not) and the burden of debt may make a student worry about how to pay (44th poorest state in the US).”

“Traditional students following their parent/guardian’s choice of major and unable to articulate their own desire to that person(s).”

“Lack of interest or ability in their chosen major.”

“Medical emergencies (physical/mental/emotional).”

“Cost of attendance - financial aid not enough to cover tuition; only loans available; increasing debt and the concern that any job will not have a salary that will allow repayment.”

“Add home-sickness – many students from rural counties stop out because they just miss home too much to stay.”

### **External Barriers**

Lastly, faculty elaborated on external factors that affect degree completion. External factors, including family commitments, lack of childcare, and job demands, account for stopout behaviors. Many students need more time to devote to their education than they have available.

Non-traditional students have families, work part-time or full-time, and limited time to interact with the campus. One participant indicated students face situational hurdles that involve finances, family life, health, and work. Students drop out of school to support themselves when they can no longer balance school and work stresses.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

“Non-traditional, returning adult students have multiple responsibilities other than being a student. Non-traditional students are employees, spouses, parents, caretakers of parents, etc. first and being a student is down on the list naturally. If any of those responsibilities becomes too much of an obstacle, it can cause the student to suspend or stop their pursuit of a degree.”

“I’ve found the reasons to be largely personal. They got married/divorced, had, or lost a child, moved, had health issues, or could no longer afford it. Though I have seen plenty of students with low GPAs, I have not found that it was due to not understanding content or having cognitive issues, it was more about their outside barriers.”

“I believe the reasons students stop out are unique to each student situation. However, there are some overarching reasons including financial issues, family obligations, health, mental or physical issues, and job or employee obligations.”

“Work scheduling often conflicts with required class times.”

“Life happens. They move, or have a baby, or lose a job, or need to find one.”

“I do think freshmen have such strong ties to their families and community that stopping out early in their career is easier for them. I am sure family bonds are just as strong elsewhere but staying close to home seems even more important here.”

***Administrators.*** Administrators comments follow.

“At our school, mainly family responsibilities, lack of funds, and work conflicts are the reasons that students stopout.”

“There are many reasons. I think most boil down to time and money.”

“Generally, life gets in the way. They don’t make school a priority or they have more pressing issues that need their attention.”

“The main reason would be financial. I find many of my students avoid taking out loans if they can, so their enrollment depends on how much money they have saved aside or how much aid they receive. Tuition changes can throw a wrench into things since they tend to plan out every penny, so additional fees or increases that were not factored into their plan can affect their enrollment. Also, personal matters such as family emergencies, changes in childcare, health issues, domestic cases, pregnancy, moving, etc. Many of these overlap into financial reasons as well. Changes in employment are another reason I see students leave school, though not always a change in position/workplace. It could be a change in shift/hours or responsibilities.”

“We work with quite a few active-duty students and similarly, if they are using tuition assistance and exhaust those funds early on, they may stopout until the next fiscal year. Deployment, PCS, promotions, staff changes, etc., also impact their enrollment.”

“I’ve found the reasons to be largely personal. They got married/divorced, had or lost a child, moved, had health issues, or could no longer afford it. Though I’ve seen plenty of students with low GPAs, I’ve not found that it was due to not understanding content or having cognitive issues, it was more about their outside barriers.”

“Time is a big factor. I would say we have a higher rate of attrition as students can’t sustain school and work responsibilities.”

“I believe what contributes to homesickness and therefore stopout is the perception that college is like high school. We have so many students who are shocked once they realize the rigor of higher education. We regularly see students who did well in high school with little effort go on academic suspension. Meeting with these students during a Suspension Appeal hearing, they express problems in time management, too many social engagements from being free from parents for the first time, not enough study time, and trying to work too many hours while going to school.”

“It is my belief that students stopout because of financial reasons. As students grapple with college choice, many do not consider if they have the resources to fully fund a college degree.”

“I do not believe that the research fully explores college fit as consistently as it does with academic preparedness and financial.”

“Family crises.”

**Research Question 2: What academic and administrative policies potentially interfere with a students’ persistence to graduation?**

The recurrent theme addressed by this research question was academic and administrative policies that have been found to create barriers to student degree completion. While some subthemes could be expanded in this question, the researcher focused on the overarching theme. Participants shared their experiences with university policy and procedures that potentially interfere with students’ persistence to graduation. Their responses came from experiences at their institutions and in their research with students at their respective institutions. There is overlap in research questions 1 and 2. According to faculty members, students stopout as part of how universities unintentionally create barriers for students. The examples of subthemes that

emerged are strict degree requirements, re-enrollment processes, and lack of faculty and advisors familiar with university policy and procedures. Students are often given the “shuffle” from office to office as the campus community does not know how to help them navigate the institutional processes.

Administrators shared their experiences with university policy and procedures that potentially interfere with students’ persistence to graduation. The interviews with administrators describe the reasons that students stopout as universities unintentionally create barriers for students. The re-occurring subthemes that emerged are strict re-admission processes, procedures that are not student-friendly, lack of faculty and advisors familiar with university policy and procedures, and degree requirements that are not flexible to meet the changing needs of students.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

“We recently increased online fees for students that live out of state. Many students who started their degrees with us got married or employed and moved far away. Even with previous college credit, the fees have made it cost prohibitive for many to finish with us based on their new location.”

“One thing I’ve consistently been frustrated with is the requirement for high school transcripts or test scores. Do accrediting agencies not consider how difficult that might be for a 70 year old student?”

“Challenges exist with all stopout initiatives including a disconnect between established offices and academic departments like the BIS program where advisors are contacting the same students as the finish programs and students receive different information from each office. They become confused and discouraged. Specifically, these challenges include institutional requirements related to general education and total number of hours as well as individual barriers

including financial issues and life/family obligations. When contacted as a stopout student, some say they have moved on from the desire to finish and are surprised to be contacted on the matter. Many believe it is not an option for them to finish and are sometimes excited to learn they are perhaps one/two classes away from completion. However, most of these students have existing financial holds on their accounts preventing them from enrollment and registration. We often learn of life events that have prevented them from completion including job changes, geographic relocation, illness, and family growth.”

“Sometimes degree programs are not setup well. Sometimes faculty inflexibility is an issue as they are unwilling to substitute course requirements within a major.”

“Frankly, a university atmosphere that is becoming increasingly hostile to more traditional or conservative points of view.”

“We don't really connect with them in a way that is meaningful for what they do in their lives. You know, they're just not going to persist or be retained at the university. I generally say responsibility, which is a broad term, but life gets in the way sometimes whether it be children, work hours, or finances. Those are big barriers and helpers to graduation. If we as an institution are adaptable or at least friendly to helping them feel as part of the community, and not an afterthought. That is also very important. Just making them feel part of the campus community, even if they don't ever step foot on the campus, just knowing that they can carve out some identity as a member of your community, it's pretty important. Make them feel part of something, and then they're more likely to carve that out as part of their identity and stay until graduation.”

“If I think about institutional, we can do more reaching out, coaching and advising. Advising might be a faculty or staff member. It could also be a success coach.”

“Rude staff. I know admissions folks get asked the same questions over and over, I do too, but you have to remember that the person on the other end of the phone is asking that question for the first time. They deserve to be treated kindly and with the acknowledgement of the bravery and determination they’re using to try to re-enroll.”

“The institutional push to enroll full-time. It’s ok for first-time, full time freshmen, but it’s a lot of pressure for a working adult. It can make them feel like we only care about the enrollment instead of the person enrolling.”

“Advising. The student system locks students out of courses for a myriad of reasons and many of the reasons or codes are “mysterious” in so that even advisors often don’t know what the codes are or how to remedy them. Faculty are often reluctant advisors, and don’t accept responsibility when they misadvise or don’t advise students.”

“The run around. Students who find they have academic or financial holds have to hunt down people or wander around campus trying to figure out how to fix things. My favorite horror story is a student who could not get help from financial aid. I finally agreed to call on her behalf. I listened to a 15-minute voice recording telling me how to do a list of things or who I should call instead to get service. When I called the then director and expressed my frustration and said, no wonder students give up, his response was that if people listen to the entire message it would eventually save them a lot of time. I reminded him that nobody listens to a 15-minute message and thinks I am so thankful for this very long message saving me time” but he didn’t “get it.”

“Relevance. As students get frustrated, I imagine they begin weighing whether the time and cost of the degree are worth the struggle.”



“Hostile environment. As I mentioned before, even as we say we want to become more welcoming and inclusive, certain thoughts and beliefs are not well tolerated, so students either figure out how to be quiet or they quietly leave.”

“So, we lost Adult Learner Services due to budget cuts, and it’s not clear who identifies students who are close to completion, or who guides students through returning.”

“Reapplying is unnecessarily complex.”

“On the other hand, we have done better with revising the Bachelor of Individualized major so that it is a good fallback option. I’m just not sure many advisors are familiar enough with it.”

“Insufficient financial aid for adult students, especially part-time.”

“Too much focus on 18-year-olds.”

“Academic renewal is better now. I’m not sure many advisors are familiar enough with it so students don’t know they can use the policy to help expunge bad grades from their academic record and GPA.”

“Minimum upper-level hours. In BIS, many students have lots of hours from community colleges or other institutions but lack upper-level hours. This is the most common barrier I see in junior and senior students who are pursuing the Bachelor of Individualized Studies major.”

“Two helpful policies that should continue to maximize Stopout recruitment are 1) waive foreign language requirements and 2) maintain Old Gen Ed requirements. These have been helpful for many returning students who complete the BIS.”

“PLA (prior learning assessment) policies are not consistent, and advisors, faculty, staff, and students are unfamiliar with the policy. It has the potential to help adults and working

professionals to earn credit for their life experiences through demonstrated course competencies.”

“I think there are enough of them (policies) that run from the admission to the graduation process. Specifically, we should review the admission process. Students are carrying documentation personally into the office. It is so cumbersome and comprehensive that it’s a deterrent for people to follow through to enroll. Then once they enroll, we shove them into orientation. What I mean is that orientation consists of don’t get drunk at a party and don’t take drugs videos. Adult students are surprised by this requirement. They are watching these videos that mean more to their kids and wonder why they are watching it. Students begin to disengage immediately.”

***Administrators.*** Administrators comments follow.

“We have reviewed all of our policies over the last 10-15 years and continue to review them periodically. We have made changes to some specifically because they hindered degree completion. I will spend a few minutes providing context for some that we changed. We used to require a minimum of 12 of the last 32 credit hours must be taken in residence. This really became a problem with the portability of transfer credit and concurrent enrollment as well as study abroad. We removed that requirement. We also lowered qualifying standards for our Academic Bankruptcy policy, we call it Academic Second Chance, so now more people qualify, improving their GPA. The university raised the dollar amount allowed on outstanding balances before a financial hold was placed on the student’s account to prevent registration. The university regularly offers 2nd half semester courses to help students complete or persist in their program. We changed our repeat policy from “only the first course attempt was removed from

the GPA and all subsequent attempts were averaged in the GPA to only the last course attempt counts in the GPA and all prior attempts were removed from the GPA.”

“Besides admissions and graduation policies, requiring students to sit out rather than taking a class or two after dismissal can be an issue.”

“Returning students can be difficult to advise because the data that advisors draw on is contingent on many factors and might not be readily available. Since the student left the institution they might have attended elsewhere, but at the time of returning not had that transcript sent. This can make the seemingly easy process of course selection more difficult and drawn out. More importantly, the University’s own silos make advising returners trickier, because those students are bound by policies that are outside the realm of the advising office. From my experience, we (advisors) were never trained in what the Office of Admissions requires of readmit students. Over time and through asking questions, we learned, but there was never a formal training, so when a returning student asked us about what requirements they needed to meet to be readmitted to the University, we often had to search elsewhere for answers.”

“There are institutional barriers that without dedicated and experienced advisors many students wouldn’t persist. Advisors often lead the way in navigating those barriers.”

“All dates and website language focuses on the traditional student experience. It’s not even generic enough to be inclusive although it might be getting better. Significantly fewer resources and services for adult, transfer, and online students are available. For instance, Financial Aid not processing 2nd 8 week start students as new students because all new students start in August until reminded them, again that’s not true. Admissions office will term activate for 2nd 8 weeks, for Spring or summer, but not fall. Or 2nd 8 weeks Spring and not Fall (or

Summer). Most of the forms include in-person signatures. Thankfully Covid-19 has helped us with that as we all moved to remote.”

“Lack of support for credit for prior learning is one. For others, students had a very low GPA when they stopped out. The admission process often denies their admission which is discouraging for them and adds more steps to the process.”

“Students get different answers from different people. They wonder why they should spend money to just take a class with no purpose. We need to do more than waive application fees. There is never any follow-up with students anymore.”

“Turnover with the points of contacts who work with these programs on both sides, connecting students with the correct contacts within the university, not enough individualized assistance for students admitted under these initiatives, students not knowing about these initiatives and not applying through them or being coded under them which makes them hard to identify, no consistent benefits for students who apply through these initiatives, student’s inability to get official transcripts from previous institutions due to balances, not enough university buy in to these programs and returners compared to new freshman, lack of fully online or part-time enrollment scholarships and financial aid, lack of communication within the university about outreach initiatives, inflexible departments and offering gen eds required courses, not great variety for test out or portfolio options, and lack of what and how transfer work is articulated.”

“Returning students honestly have it the worst in that they typically have to petition due to GPA, as well as then having to deal with university holds that prevent registration or receiving financial aid. They then normally have to go through IT to reset accounts because the same user

ID is generated for them, but no one remembers their passwords from 10 years ago, all while the university assumes that they are familiar with this process since they completed it years ago.”

“No institutional support for what is happening to a student in their personal life.”

“Unclear processes for students who are ready to graduate. Advisors do not know the forms needed to process course substitutions or waivers. They are unable to find out how students apply for graduation and when the deadline is to apply.”

“Financial, academic preparedness, college fit, academic and social integration, and family responsibilities.”

“Degree completion initiatives sound solid on the webpage, but implementation isn’t always smooth. If a completer doesn’t believe they can find success in a web class, they won’t complete their degree. If they can’t afford the cost of taking one class at a time and can’t receive any financial aid until 6 hours, they won’t complete their degree. If faculty aren’t responsive to their questions, they feel disrespected especially if the person has been working for years and have a certain professional standard, they themselves meet. They need a dedicated advisor to reach out to them several times a semester to check in on them not only on progress in classes but “hey, how’s the stress level? Anything I can do to help? Need a connection on campus? Did you know we have tutoring?”

**Research Question 3: What faculty and staff resources are offered to help students in completing their degree requirements?**

Both faculty and administrators agree limited resources are offered to help students complete their degree requirements. There is little guidance on how to advise college students. Faculty and staff are not provided any training on how to advise students on academic or personal issues, policies and procedures that pertain to the registrar’s office or financial aid,

academic or institutional resources, or system technology to aid in their jobs. No participant mentioned Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) training. The overarching theme is any training offered is never required. Only a few participants expressed training occurs at their respective institutions. In summary, answers to this research vary by institution and participant group.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

“That is a good question. I am not aware of any.”

“I am not aware of any specific training available for faculty/staff related to degree completion at my institution. However, there are many resources available including the Transfer Center, the Registrar’s Office and dedicated academic advisors that can provide information to students interested in finished a degree.”

“My current institution offers nothing. During internal professional development, I’ve presented about working with adult students and with transfer students. But it was optional, and not well attended.”

“I know we have faculty professional development on occasion about student-friendly pedagogy or better advising, but I think these are good but are not very practical. A practical solution would be a one-stop shop where when students get stuck, they know where to go and then expect a concierge-type experience where someone walks them to various offices or makes calls on their behalf and works with them through issues that arise. We like to do a lot of directing and pointing, but rarely do we do much advocating.”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“I cannot recommend the Master Advisor Certificate program enough. It underscores the importance of undergraduate advising in regard to keeping students on track. Concomitantly, it

allows advisors to think deeply about who they are as faculty, staff, and as a person to become the best advisor they can be. This is good for them and it is good for students.”

“What we have done specifically in our department program is we've provided wraparound services to make sure that people are fully aware of what is necessary for them to exit the institution and get their diploma. So, it's like a level service to make sure they get to the finish line.”

“Lots of opportunities are available if people choose to take advantage. We have been able to get staff more involved. Working remotely provides more opportunities for comfort calls to students who did stop out. We are going back through DFW (drop, fail, withdrawn) students for last 3-5 years to find out where they failed out. We are reducing PLA caps enrollments for courses and utilizing data to determine bottlenecks and seeing why students aren't completing on time.”

*Administrators.* Administrator responses seem to vary by position and institution. Administrators comments follow.

“We have a faculty member that has a part-time load teaching and part-time load responsible for advisor training. Advisor training materials and videos are available. There is an advising website for students and faculty. The university also offers degree audit training.

“Not sure.”

“Not sure on resources available to faculty. Really nothing for Staff unless we provide the training or go outside the organization.”

“We are still a member of the Kentucky Associate for Continuing Higher Education (KACHE) and attend those conferences. While we are not able to travel right now, if there was a

webinar or training that would benefit us, our supervisor would be supportive of this training. We are no longer members of ACHE.”

“Office of Transfer & Adult Services has an admissions counselor dedicated to adult returners, webpages for Project Graduate and specifically for adult returners walking them through the (re)application process, which faculty or staff can refer to if needed. Outside of Admissions, I do not know of any specific resources or training for these degree completion initiatives. Advisors know of these initiatives, but unless there is some state or national professional development opportunity that we can sign up for, there are not any in-house trainings that I know of.”

“Our school is very much decentralized and does not have an office with overarching responsibility for getting students to the finish line. This is mostly left to colleges and departments. Occasionally some offices will help students on a case-by-case basis, but no systemic efforts at the university level exist. Most of the university effort is geared towards students early in their careers. Some examples of those efforts are Fifth Week Check-In, Freshmen AP Project, Registration Workshops).”

“None at this time, no funding.”

“This is unknown to me at this moment.”

“None of which I am aware.”

#### **Research Question 4: What faculty and staff resources are needed to help students in completing their degree requirements?**

The responses to the interview questions point to students needing more time and money to improve their chances of completing their degrees. It is not surprising that universities need those same resources to better assist students with degree completion. The themes established



from this research question focus on prioritizing training for faculty and staff, a central point of contact and additional staffing needs, additional funding and scholarship dollars, and a prior learning assessment policy. Each theme, along with faculty and administrators' comments, will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

### **Training for Faculty and Staff**

Both faculty and administrators acknowledge the need for professional development and training on a reoccurring basis. Education on policies and university procedures is critical to meeting both traditional and post-traditional students' ever-changing needs. Training can be in-house or at the state or national level. Faculty want to see "advising valued on the same level as service and research." Even institutions that offer training recognize that there is still a need to do more training and educating on campus policies and procedures.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

"Better advising training."

"1. Adopt a posture of "advising is teaching. 2. Value advising on the same level of service and research. Include this in tenure and promotion measures. 3. Train faculty/advisors to do the human work of frequent contact with advisees. This not only elevates advising to its proper place, but it also naturally creates contact points for teachers and students in advising, mentoring, and belonging behaviors."

"I believe a training or professional development program related to transfer course work would benefit those who work with stopout students. In addition, training and or seminars highlighting the barriers and challenges these student face would benefit faculty/staff and administrators. Helping stopout students goes beyond informing them about needed course work. They have questions about their financial obligations and eligibility that I cannot answer,

and I must refer them to the Financial Aid office. More access and understanding of this information would be helpful.”

“In Kentucky, training on the state-wide general education policy. It can be a huge difference-maker for a student. I think process mapping and a communications audit are usually necessary, but then train people on what the messaging should look like.”

“Seminar on teaching for new faculty, best practices for faculty development, online teaching learning experience and ADA compliance, and leadership is innovation for program directors are a few trainings that would make excellent trainings for faculty at all universities. Faculty are always in need of training on advising tools and university policies each year.”

***Administrators.*** Administrators comments follow.

“We have a faculty member that has a part-time load teaching and part-time load responsible for advisor training; advisor training materials and videos; advising website for students and faculty; degree audit training.”

“For staff, advisors/administrators: Training as it pertains to advising and understanding the adult student population are always helpful. In addition, a general knowledge of what they go through when they apply for admission, financial aid, and scholarships is helpful. So, internal and external training both has its place in being an effective advisor. As far as faculty, training about adult students and credit for prior learning would be helpful.”

“I think asking campus partners to take some sort of regular professional development or training on adult learners, our assumptions vs. realities, and then tailoring it to that specific office as to how we can help these learners when they come to us. I think more information from the state-level about the impact of adult learners in higher ed and how critical they are to the

attainment goals put forth. Convince our institutions that we need to focus on getting stopouts to come back and why it's a steal."

"A greater emphasis on student development theory concerning upperclassmen would be helpful. As stated already, the focus is on new students, so it can be difficult to delineate upper classmen and their distinct needs, from those of their younger peers. For example, it can be assumed that upperclassmen stopouts and returners have different needs than do first time freshmen concerning childcare, family issues, financial issues, and workforce commitments. Any training needs to be founded on strict definitions of these learners as compared to the more frequently studied traditional students."

"We have some academic colleges that do central advising at least for the first two years of the degree and others are decentralized. Dedicated advisors that are fully trained and cross trained on various aspects about university, state, and federal requirements/regulations, throw in NCAA and VA requirements, could make a large impact on degree completion initiatives."

"Getting more faculty and staff trained and involved."

"Right now, I need our student information system and a good working relationship with various campus partners. Many our campus partners need additional training and education on changes across campus. Also, faculty influence to push some things through. A lot of research on our office's end to make sure we are up to date on community resources."

"I am an advocate for proactiveness. We must develop strategies to search out these students before they officially make the decision to stopout. An effective CRM has always been a good predictor to this."

"I do know that faculty have so many things to do to gain tenure that being responsible to help someone complete a degree (especially one with old requirements about which they know

nothing) would be a burden. Professional advisors may be the best contact for completers. If a university-wide program were really connected with each college having a particular person invested and trained on the programs in that college they could network their college to find/create success initiatives with, for example, department chairs. If service to completers counted somewhere in tenure (specifically) faculty would look at the situation through a different lens.”

“The current policy on contacting students who don’t register for the next semester is ineffective. We (advisors) are asked to contact students multiple times. If we know the person isn’t returning, we are asked to fill out a report and then the student becomes a sort of target for multiple contacts. For example, I know one student in an online program who gained a promotion at work. The student indicated they would contact us when they are ready to return and that was indicated in notes. I don’t think we should contact that student each semester asking if they are ready to return. I believe it would be helpful that if a student withdraws from all classes or they don’t return for the next semester they should be contacted by their advisor, department chair, or college administration. If they respond to that contact, there should be particular talking points for the staff member to cover and then notate in the advising system. If they don’t respond there should be one additional attempt and then the file should be moved to inactive and not included in the next round of contacts. People respond or don’t respond for personal reasons.”

### **Central Point of Contact or Dedicated Office**

Another theme noted by faculty and administrators is having a central point of contact or a dedicated office for stopout students. The point of contact provides accurate information to the campus community. The designated person or office would serve institutions in accomplishing

aims and objectives that focus on university degree completion goals. As stated by a faculty participant, “This is crucial. I hate that we have to reinvent the wheel because this kind of student service is seen as a luxury when budgets get tight.” One respondent went even further to say, “universities should have an established office with a mission statement behind it.” A few respondents, mainly administrators, were skeptical that having one central point of contact would be enough without adequate support from higher administration. The supporting responses for the point of contact and designated office are as follows.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

“Our institution does have a central point of contact for stopout initiatives (Project Graduate). More non-traditional student support. We do have some offices, such as our library, who do a fabulous job. We need a regular generation of a list of students who have stopped attending and organized outreach to them to keep communication open between the student and institution, would all be helpful.”

“It would be a dream! We’ve just hired an Assistant (or maybe Associate) VP for Adult Learning. I’m hoping they can be a key player in making advancements on our campus. Enrollment Management teams/decision-makers just aren’t there yet. They’re going to die on the demographic cliff of these traditional-aged students.”

“I still think a one-stop problem solving shop would give faculty and students concrete direction when issues arise.”

“I think the idea holds promise, but unless the President and Provost put their full weight behind such coordinators, they will likely be marginalized by others. Also, I think many of the challenges are systemic and cultural. Most institutions would have to transform faculty and even

staff perspectives about their role in student success in order for the coordinator to be successful.”

“Designated points of contact are crucial. We used to do this. I hate that we’re having to reinvent the wheel, because this kind of student service is seen as a luxury when budgets get tight.”

“I believe a centralized effort is needed to address the issues related to stopout students at my institution. If this effort is coordinated through and by academic advisors with the sole purpose of working with stopout students, progress can be made. As stated before, these unique students need one place to connect with on their way to graduation.”

“I am in favor of a centralized/dedicated unit to serve the stopout student from all programs and departments on campus. This would free up the current academic/faculty advisors to work with beginning/continuing students on a secure path to graduation. Connecting with stopout students takes time and persistence on the advisors’ part and many will attempt to contact these students and never receive a response.”

“People to call, write, email, and contact students who are close to degree completion.”

“I think a “Graduation Czar” of some sort could be beneficial in identifying and communicating effective graduation efforts across campus and communicating those to the university more broadly.”

“I think it has to be a top-level priority at the institution and you got to apply some human capital to those efforts, and then, you know, you're going to see gains and progress because you have people championing for individuals getting to the finish line that are part of a subpopulation. If you do not have the humans’ there or at least some advocates, it is impossible

to build a program without somebody dedicated to it and owning connections to a unique population.”

“Absolutely, I am fortunate to be at an institution that has an office dedicated to adult learner services as well as associate provost for adult learning. The AVP is a new position so it will be exciting to see where the university goes from here with this new role leading our efforts.”

“We talk a lot about student support, and I believe we are well-meaning. But until we really analyze where the sticking points are and then own the responsibility to remove them and/or advocate students through them, we will continue to put band aids on institutional problems. Many of us at universities don’t think of ourselves as in the customer-service business, but our competitors have been willing to embrace that to a much greater degree and who can blame students from going elsewhere when they hear, ‘Let me help you with that,’ versus ‘You need to go over there to get help - good luck’.”

***Administrators.*** Administrators comments follow.

“It is so important in performance funding and rankings. We have some academic colleges that do central advising (at least for the first two years of the degree) and others are decentralized. Dedicated advisors that are fully trained and cross trained on various aspects about university, state, and federal requirements/regulations, throw in NCAA and VA requirements, could make a large impact on degree completion initiatives.”

“I do not see that as a full-time position per se, we do have Student Success staff who work with each incoming cohort on these efforts.”

“I feel it has to come from the top (state). Until then, the focus will always be on new freshman for full-time enrollment.”

“Either an existing office needs responsibility in this area added to its purview, or our school should create an institutional body devoted to these students, as the Advising Center is devoted to first- and second-year students. Unless the issue is firmly supported with concrete resources, it would be difficult to create and maintain any sort of culture shift towards focusing on returning students seeking degree completion. This is certainly needed, and in my opinion, a dedicated staff with dedicated resources is the only way to make meaningful inroads in supporting this particular student group.”

“I wouldn't be opposed to that at all. I think that would be great. The University has a high DFW course - quasi early alert program, but nothing proactive that I know of otherwise, unless it's by unit (college within the University) or even by program. So, a University-wide early alert for prevention of stop out would help. A lot of students, when they stop out, don't want to talk about it but for the ones that do, they usually want to talk a lot about it - so outreach to those students.”

“That is what we have here for the most part. There are a couple people scattered in different offices right now who could communicate more to present more of a united front and provide services to degree completer students. Having one person/office who can help adults takes some of the confusion out of the process. I generally have to refer them to other departments for help (admission, financial aid, registration, etc.) so a quick and friendly response from one person would help.”

“I love the idea. I think that every institution should have an office dedicated to adult returners and degree completion initiatives. I think there should be student success coaches designated just for adults as well as coordinators that could work within the university to help streamline processes. Just having one person honestly would not be enough, there would need to



be an office because there is absolutely a need with the number of adult returners we have and can expect.”

“An established office with a mission statement behind it. We want staff and faculty to get on board, to encourage for people to contribute to society.”

“Yes, continue with our current resources (central point of contact for degree completion/Project Graduate) and possibly expand based on university direction from newly hired associate provost. It also connects to our strategic plan goals on increasing retention and graduation rates.”

“We need to take the stigma away as degree completer programs being a lesser degree. It would be helpful to have key people from each office on board as an adult student liaison so there is someone who is trained and ready to help these students. Identifying students who qualify and finding personnel who have time to reach out to them is also needed. Often just having the correct contact information for a person who has stopped out can be difficult.”

“I am an advocate for centralized programming because you know who is responsible and what area to ask questions. I believe that everyone needs to get on board with common and consistent thinking patterns as to why this important. People across the campus view this differently.”

“An investment in professional advising staff dedicated to completers. Though the number of advisees may be low it would offer the opportunity to make more personal contacts or develop programs more realistic. Having someone in the Adult Learner Office with a particular contact for each college would be beneficial. I don’t believe one person (one-stop shop) responsible for every major on campus is unrealistic.”

“I believe there should be at minimum a centralized point of contact connected to a specific contact in each college and that person in the college should have “release time” based on the number of completers assigned to them. If faculty are expected to take part the standard for tenure needs to include such service as advising (and should generally anyway).”

### **Additional Funding and Scholarship Dollars**

Another theme is additional funding and scholarship dollars. University dollars would expand services through communications, marketing, student support services, and further support offices and units working on degree completion initiatives. Scholarship dollars are needed to support online and part-time learners. The state funding model for public higher education in Kentucky does not provide subsidies for part-time enrollment. Scholarships could assist in paying off prior tuition balances for students who cannot return to the university due to the unpaid balance. Additionally, they could offset the cost of the courses still needed to complete their degree. The faculty and administrators’ responses that relate to this theme are as follows.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

“Scholarship opportunities for part-time students.”

“We often don’t know who will or how to help students when they have financial needs in particular.”

“Funds to cover small tuition bills for students with just a few hours remaining. Marketing materials are needed for sending to these students showing the financial benefits connected to earning a degree. A plan could be personalized to each student who is within a few hours of graduation.”

“Investment and refocus on adult students as regular members of campus.”

*Administrators.* Administrators comments follow.

“In an ideal world, I would like a specific fund for returning students to help them pay for tuition and non-tuition expenses, balance forgiveness similar to Wayne State, increased scholarship opportunities for online only and part-time students, designated office to work with these students, solid community relationships to connect students with childcare/food banks/electricity, housing, rent assistance/technology resources, also stronger relationships with community businesses and potentially offering some sort of employee tuition assistance. Would also love additional funds to be able to reach out to students and provide them with more recognition and feel more connected to the university.”

“Scholarship dollars and resources.”

“Funding can be critical to assist students to pay tuition and academic forgiveness already in place is crucial for some students and advisors can contact students and make them aware of these options.”

“Institutional support.”

“From my understanding, the current state funding model for public higher ed institutions does not include part-time enrollment. I think having something at the state-level would need to happen in order for these initiatives to really gain a footing and thrive at our school. Until these students are counted and recognized in CPE’s funding model, it is hard for institutions to focus on those populations that will not bring in funding.”

“Funds to waive application fees.”

“Financial support and resources are needed; however, if the state isn’t asking for data on degree completion numbers then the resources will never be made available.”

## **Prior Learning Assessment Policy**

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) was the last theme identified by faculty and administrators. Many adult completion programs include awarding college credit for military training, workplace experiential learning, previously earned certificates or credentials, and other experiential learning through the evaluation of a prior learning assessment portfolio. One faculty participant revealed that PLA is proven to accelerate progress to graduation. He also indicated that PLA improves graduation percentages for those adult learners who receive credits for prior learning. An administrator in this study suggested that her university needed a better and more consistent policy for prior learning assessment. She suggests that universities should acknowledge credible learning from outside sources. The comments by subpopulation for this theme are as follows.

***Faculty.*** Faculty comments follow.

“PLA standards for consistency. The university needs a greater focus on the diverse needs of adult learners. A stronger PLA policy would be a good start. We should encourage students to utilize the option and not fear that it takes away from butts in seats. Also, a database for previously awarded credit to not have to reinvent the wheel and award consistent credit to all populations.”

“My institution attempted to implement PLA for certain student demographics including military/established professionals in the past, but I believe there was never an agreed upon policy for the entire university. This would be helpful for professionals wanting to earn their degrees after establishing a career. Military students do receive academic credit for their service as it relates to established course curriculum.”

“As a pathway to start recruiting more and more adults, we should acknowledge, and value work they have accrued over time. They are more likely to graduate and case studies have shown this. One in particular that came out was an external review of around 72 institutions. They have empirical proof, again, 10 years later, that shows people who have access to PLA are more likely to graduate and do so faster. Not only that, but they also actually take more credit hours at the university. And it seems really counterintuitive because if you're granting credit hours, how could they be taking more credits at such a low rate. Overall, it's because we just acknowledge them as whole and valuable human. We're actually going to increase retention with these types of policies. They're going to be more engaged, and they're going to get to graduation. They're retained at such a high rate that they feel valued and more engaged so when you want a more engaged valued student. In all, this is great for the university because they're more likely to become donors faster because they're more established in the workforce. Whereas a traditional a student takes 10 plus years to establish themselves, they're very unlikely to give to the institution until they really become fully immersed in the workforce, whereas adults are much more likely quicker donors. If you just engage them in a way that values and acknowledges the goodness that they bring to the table.”

“We also need far better PLA.”

***Administrators.*** Administrators comments follow.

“Bringing people back to campus to finish their degree is important not only because it helps these students personally but because it is important for the university as a whole as far as numbers go. I think universities are starting to recognize that this is an important demographic that can help enrollments. At the same time, shifting the focus that college is just for traditional aged students can be hard not only for faculty, staff, and administration but for the governing

boards of universities. They are typically of the mindset that a college student is young. Support services and thinking about these returning students' experience from day one to graduation is important. They are not the same as traditional aged students and should not be treated as such. We can and should award credit for life experience as students can relate their experiences to course competencies. Another way we could help these students is to offer short "micro credentials" that lead to a degree. If we could break down degree programs into smaller certificates with milestones, I think this could help encourage students to finish and also help working adults add items to their resume that could help them professionally."

"PLA is great in helping students to accelerate their degree requirements."

### **Conclusion**

This chapter contains an explanation of this study's findings and analysis of data collected. Through the use of a qualitative study, interviews were conducted at three universities, chosen because of similar size, location, and participation in state degree completion initiatives. Sixteen faculty and administrators agreed to participate in this study, resulting in a low sample size. Data were coded to determine emerging themes related to degree completion, training and campus resources, and best practices for increased graduation rates. Comments were coded by subpopulation to develop frequencies.

The interviews were approximately thirty minutes in length. Questions from the interview guide were directly related to each research question, as noted in the major findings section. Participants were candid during the interviews, and significant responses were included in that section of this chapter. Participants reported the same barriers in this study as noted in the literature review: institutional factors, individual attributes, and external factors. Almost all participants felt quality academic advising was linked to higher graduation rates. Faculty and

administrators noted that a central point of contact plays a vital role in students' graduation and retention rates. Both faculty and administrators alike were unaware of any training available to them as frontline workers who support student success. Chapter five will provide a discussion of this study's findings and provide recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter Five: Summary, Discussion of Findings, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Chapter five discusses this study's findings for each research question, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research. Multiple stakeholders from three universities were interviewed for this study to gain insight into the various perspectives from the entire campus community. The purpose of this study was: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies. The intent was to understand better the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how institutions may retain or recruit back stopouts to complete certificates and degrees.

Previous and current research in this area has focused mainly on "why students stopout." This study goes further by using that research to guide institutional responses to help these students cross the finish line. By analyzing faculty and administrators' experiences, this study recognizes the difficulties faced by all parties. Through this research, the campus community of Western Kentucky University can see the impact through the narratives of their stakeholders as well as those from similar institutions. Campus leadership and offices from across the college campus can use this research to strengthen and further develop relationships with stopout students. Additionally, leadership can understand the need for additional resources to serve this population of students.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings from the participant interviews will be discussed in this section. Chapter four provided the comprehensive results from the interviews, organized by research questions.



This section will summarize the findings under the related research questions. All questions are from the perspectives of faculty and administrators.

### **Research Question 1: What significant factors affect degree completion among the students enrolled at an institution?**

**Discussion.** The findings under research question one supported that students stopout as a result of institutional barriers, individual attributes, and external barriers, consistent with the literature review provided in chapter two. These reasons were evident in participant interviews by both faculty and administrators. While examining the experiences of faculty and administrators from three institutions, these themes emerged in the narratives. They led to the development of implications and applications for this research: institutional, individual, and external. The themes align with the information presented in the literature review used in this research study.

#### **Institutional Barriers**

The findings under institutional barriers revealed that policies and procedures prevent students from completing their degrees. Faculty and administrators reported students lack the flexibility to take classes in the evenings, weekends, or online. Participants reported students are often misadvised or unable to reach academic advisors and other student support services when they need them. Colleges, such as these in the study, are known to cater to the traditional 18-year-old college student.

Similarly, faculty and administrators indicated that students need to feel a sense of belonging to campus and a connection to faculty. The human support is critical to establishing a students' sense of belonging. Bergman et al. (2014) reported a supportive campus helps students overcome challenges to earn a degree. He found that campus environments played a significant

role in creating an atmosphere where students can feel connected to faculty and staff. Therefore, universities need to be proactive in establishing practices and services conducive to the working adult. Participants further revealed a lack of mentoring, especially for underrepresented and underserved populations. Universities must develop policies and procedures that support students as they persist to graduation.

The rising cost of tuition can be a barrier to students. Non-traditional students account for every penny that they have and how it will be spent. Additional fees that were not factored into the student's cost upfront can affect their enrollment. Universities should develop a plan for each student based on their missing degree requirements with the total cost upfront. The missing requirements are already an issue as students do not have the flexibility in the already too strict degree requirements for a major. Students who stopout face additional barriers as often they discover their financial aid has been suspended from their previous enrollment. Faculty and administrators cannot help students navigate this process as they too lack an understanding of the financial aid processes. Students, faculty, and administrators alike are often shuffled from office to office without ever receiving the answers to their questions.

### **Individual Attributes**

The findings under individual attributes confirm that student behaviors, motivation, and academic preparation affect whether or not a student earns their degree. Other attributes include demographic factors and family characteristics. Some literature reports that individual attributes are also known as situation barriers. Millea et al. (2018) indicated behaviors, motivation, academic preparation, demographic factors, and family characteristics influence students' success in college. Johnson & Rochkind (2009) further support that poor academic preparation and study habits prevent students from finishing their degree.

Participants shared that financial barriers overlap across the institutional, individual, and external barriers. According to participants, many non-traditional students cannot take enough classes to qualify for financial aid, so finances are a major challenge. Students cannot afford it. As one participant stated, “money is the easy answer, but it is more complicated than that.” The costs are too high, especially for part-time students who may not be eligible for financial aid. Universities must develop stopout programs and better resources for students. Universities can offer tuition discounts or scholarships that encourage students to complete their degrees. Participants from one school indicated how their university pays off small balances for students or will scholarship their final class(es) to get them to finish. More universities should consider this approach as performance-based funding will provide a greater reward in the end compared to the cost of those credit hours upfront.

Many first-generation or underprepared students lack the self-confidence that they are college material. They lack the support needed to confirm they can achieve their degree. Faculty and administrators indicate under-prepared students also fear they will not be successful. These students often feel overwhelmed in the classroom. Poor performance issues can be another barrier, as confirmed by this research. One administrator reported that students need several remedial classes due to the level of education received in high school being some of the lowest in the nation. Poor performance in high school or on standardized tests adds additional costs in tuition and fees for students.

Faculty and administrators report that students suffer from diagnosed mental health disorders, anxiety, and depression. These individual barriers further affect how a student feels about their success or lack thereof in courses. These students often experience additional health issues as they are isolated on campus due to inadequate campus resources. About half of the

participants revealed that students need to make a connection to how the degree can improve their lives. Students are unable to connect to the classroom and fail to understand the content relevance as it relates to their degree program or career goals. Homesickness was revealed in this study that was not mentioned in the literature review. Faculty and administrators explained that students from rural counties stop out because they miss home too much to stay enrolled. Homesickness could overlap with the sense of belonging previously discussed; however, it seems to go deeper than that from their interactions with students. Universities must develop stop out programs and resources.

### **External Barriers**

The research shows a relationship to the literature review for external barriers. The external barriers indicated by faculty and administrators include family commitments, childcare issues, and job demands. Students do not have the time to go to school and handle all the external barriers they experience while taking classes. The external barriers always take precedence over school. Bers & Schuetz (2014) confirms that students provide a list of barriers to returning to college, such as work and family obligations and financial pressures. Johnson and Rochkind (2009) report students left college because they need to work more.

Faculty and administrators report that work responsibilities often conflict with required class times. One faculty member explained that students are employees, spouses, parents, and caretakers of parents first. Unfortunately, being a student is lower on the list. As life happens, students are forced to suspend or stop their pursuit of earning a degree.

Based on participant feedback from one school, their students experienced an additional external barrier not presented in the literature review. Administrators revealed that active-duty military students had added additional barriers if using tuition assistance. These students tend to

exhaust funds early on and must stop out until their funds are re-instated the following fiscal year. Their enrollment is further impacted by deployment, promotions, or changes in permanent duty stations.

**Research Question 2: What academic and administrative policies potentially interfere with a students' persistence to graduation?**

**Discussion.** The findings under research question two revealed that universities, such as these in this study, have policies and procedures that interfere with a students' persistence to graduation. All faculty and administrators confirm that strict degree requirements and university policies in the academic catalog unintentionally create barriers for students. The re-enrollment and financial aid process are inadvertently cumbersome. Participants noted that degree programs are not set up well. Programs are unwilling to substitute course requirements within the major. Some participants added that transfer credit is not always accepted for certain majors. The upper-level hour requirement was another barrier mentioned by participants. Students have enough credit hours to graduate but lack the upper-level hours for the degree or within their major. University accreditation may determine whether or not these requirements can be waived.

Faculty and administrators are not familiar enough with university policies that impact students positively or negatively. Academic forgiveness can be a beneficial policy for students; however, the campus community does not know enough about the policy to know when a student needs to apply for academic forgiveness. This policy permits a student to expunge poor grades from their academic record. Administrators for this study reveal that many in the campus community have no idea that this policy exists, especially if they are new to advising or the university.

Faculty and administrators suggest that stopout students benefit greatly from a foreign language waiver and permission to follow older general education requirements. These are often helpful for many returning students. The issue presented by participants is that stopouts do not know whom to contact to guide them through the re-enrollment. According to participants at the home institution, Adult Learner Services was lost due to budget cuts. It is no longer clear who identifies students who are close to completion. The turnover in staff who serve as central points of contact leads to additional barriers for students and the campus community alike.

**Research Question 3: What faculty and staff resources are offered to help students in completing their degree requirements?**

**Discussion.** The findings under research question three revealed that universities offer very limited, if any, training for faculty and administrators covering academic advising and university policies. Faculty and administrators are not given training on how to advise students who experience academic or personal issues. They also lack the necessary knowledge on admission, registrar, or financial aid policies and procedures. Also, they lack the academic, institutional, or technologies needed to aid in their jobs.

The faculty reported that no official training takes place. They were confident that resources existed that could have provided information to students. Participants indicated they would have to contact individual offices for answers rather than one central point of contact. Participants revealed the added challenges that occurred when the same question led to multiple answers if asked to multiple offices. They further expressed how incredibly difficult navigating the university system would be for students because of their own experiences with the university “shuffle.” The need for a central point of contact cannot be stressed enough from this research.

Some administrators echoed training is unavailable, while other participants were unsure of what the university offered. This was a surprising result in the research. Universities are equipped to provide lifelong learning opportunities for their students, faculty, and staff. Nevertheless, they are not utilizing their campus resources to give the faculty and staff the support they need to be successful. The participating administrators averaged over 17 years of experience at their respective institutions. They should have known the resources available to them for training if such training existed. Universities are missing the mark in providing on-going training to the campus community. Any training would have to be sought outside the university, adding unnecessary expenses for universities when they are in the business of educating constituents. A faculty participant recommended a master's level program that was available at his institution. The university could capitalize on this program by offering it to faculty and administrators on a regular basis.

After interviewing all participants, it was determined that only one university in this study offered additional support for stopout students. This particular school has dedicated resources for stopout initiatives, such as academic advisors who work exclusively with stopout students and adult learners, financial aid through scholarships, and a senior-level administrator who leads efforts for degree completion initiatives and adult learner services. The senior-level administrator is a newly created position that resulted from university leadership recognizing the gap in services for adult students. Students at this school can apply for a \$1,500 scholarship to further support their efforts in finishing their degree. Other universities, such as WKU, should model services offered by their peer institution if it intends to meet the institutional mission and strategic plan goals that aim to increase student persistence and graduation rates.

#### **Research Question 4: What faculty and staff resources are needed to help students in completing their degree requirements?**

**Discussion.** The findings under research question four supported that universities can provide more support to faculty, administrators, and students in degree completion initiatives consistent with the literature review provided in chapter two. These reasons were evident in participant interviews with both faculty and administrators. While examining the experiences of faculty and administrators from three institutions, these themes emerged in the narratives: training for faculty and staff, a dedicated central point of contact, additional funding and scholarship dollars, and either creating or emphasizing a prior learning assessment policy. These findings are supported by the information presented in the literature review as well as the faculty and administrators who shared their experiences for this study.

#### **Training for Faculty and Staff**

The findings under training for faculty and staff revealed that colleges and universities provide little to no staff training opportunities. Thirteen faculty and administrators acknowledge they need training on advising tools and university policies. This theme overlaps with the findings from research question three. Training is not something that can be done once. It must be reoccurring as policies and procedures at the university change to meet traditional and post-traditional students' needs. Even the participants in this study indicate there can never be too much training offered; however, they suggest that academic advising should be valued on the same level as service and research when considering promotion and tenure if it is not already part of the process. The home institution in this study does not consider academic advising for promotion and tenure.



Universities should consider process mapping and communication audits as reported by one faculty participant. Training materials should be developed and available in a central location. Another suggestion is to create an advising website with training materials and videos. Administrators report that more faculty need to be involved in the advising processes as their influence is needed in voicing the shortfalls that exist with advising. Faculty and administrators must work together to impact degree completion initiatives on their campuses.

### **Central Point of Contact or Dedicated Office**

This theme was the most voiced of any from this research. It is further supported by the literature review presented in chapter two. The results confirm a central point of contact is critical to impact persistence and graduation rates for stopout students. All faculty and administrators from this study agree with previous research on this topic. It is noted that participants were frustrated with campus leaders who fail to apply human capital to degree completion initiatives. Participants suggest universities will realize gains and progress on persistence and graduation rates when they designate a central point of contact for degree completion initiatives. This position cannot be the first to be cut when budgets get tight. It is simply not a luxury. The skeptics in this study disclosed that one person alone could not shoulder this burden. They suggest a dedicated office is a more practical solution. The assumption is that all participants would have agreed if asked to choose between a central point of contact or a dedicated office.

### **Additional Funding and Scholarship Dollars**

The findings under this theme align with previous research on this topic. It was more of a necessary assumption than an area where faculty and administrators felt they could champion for change. This theme overlaps with the results reported in research question one. An investment

in stopout initiatives is overdue. Tinto (1993) emphasizes that university personnel should determine how investments and institutional management strategies impact student success rates. The investment is not only necessary from universities, but more importantly, from state-level support. The results provide several examples of how universities could spend the additional funds for strategies that increase degree completion. These examples are all represented in research question four. We have already discussed training for faculty and staff as well as dedicated staff for assisting stopouts.

Additional funds in terms of scholarship dollars are needed. Students could use the monies to cover past tuition balances, tuition and fees for remaining degree requirements, application fees, or outside expenses like childcare, transportation, or rental or purchase of a computer. The cost to be a student is not cheap; however, the value of an education is evident in previous research on the topic. Universities must do a better job of providing the data to students that the return on investment of a college degree is worth all costs.

### **Prior Learning Assessment Policy**

The findings under this theme show a relationship between the institutional barriers present in chapter one to the needed resources presented in research question four. Also, it overlaps with findings in research question 2. It does align with contributing research found during the literature review; however, it was not included in that section's narrative. It was not an outcome the researcher expected to reveal through this research. Institutions should award college credit for demonstrated prior learning to meet student needs (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). The ability to earn college credit for prior learning eliminates course requirements empowers students to be actively engaged in their curriculum. Universities continue to maintain the academic rigor of the curriculum.

Faculty and administrators both advocate for the creation of or better emphasis on the prior learning assessment policy. The prior learning assessment policy must be flexible to meet the diverse needs of all students. The analysis indicates that the policy should acknowledge and value the work students have accrued over time. Participants in this study pointed out that students who earn credit for previous work experience are more likely to graduate than others. They also emphasize that these students enroll in more credit hours each semester which is counterintuitive to what universities fear will happen if they give students credit for prior learning. As noted by participants, prior learning assessment helps students accelerate their degree requirements, thus improving student persistence and graduation rates.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations were inherent in this study. The relatively small sample size of 18 participants is a limitation. Data saturation was achieved with the selected number of participants. Saturation was visible as all participants identified the same themes. There was no need to conduct additional research beyond the initial participants. Additionally, this study was limited to three schools in similar geographic locations, and overlap of faculty and administrators' backgrounds could not be avoided. It was challenging to find faculty who were willing to participate in this study. These findings are not generalizable to other institutions; however, the study is applicable to similar structures at peer institutions. Participants were required to have experience in degree completion initiatives where most are accustomed to navigating institutional issues that block student persistence and graduation. The similarity of participants also assisted with rich experiences for data saturation, yet enough diversification to aid in research findings.

Limitations with this study's methods require discussion. There is a chance that researcher bias could have occurred during the coding and analysis phases. Participants were required to describe their own experiences at their respective institutions. Responses may not accurately reflect true experiences as participants could fear their answers would be under scrutiny, primarily from the home institution participants.

Another limitation developed during this study; a global pandemic known as COVID-19 significantly affected the researcher and participants. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus that spread primarily through person-to-person contact. The pandemic affected colleges and universities as many shut down in-person instruction and transitioned to remote learning. Faculty and administrators faced increased burdens as all courses and meetings being moved to zoom and other technologies for over a year. Many faculty and administrators found themselves overwhelmed with family obligations as many post-secondary schools had to move in-person instruction to virtual learning. It was unrealistic to ask faculty and administrators to sit through a lengthy phone interview. The researcher was mindful and kept all interviews under 30 minutes.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations are in three categories: policies and procedure improvement, training and resources, and recommendations for future research. "Policies and procedure improvement" provides suggestions for universities to consider in helping students overcome barriers that affect degree completion. "Training and resources" provides suggestions that can improve faculty and administrator's ability to help students graduate at high rates. "Recommendations for future research" provides ideas for future research within each university and in higher education.

## **Policies and Procedure Improvement**

- Accept and incorporate prior learning assessment in all programs. This acknowledges learning from business or private industry, military, and other areas where students can demonstrate knowledge and skills for applicable disciplines.
- Increase financial aid and tuition support for getting students across the finish line. Additional research may be needed to determine the amount of aid or support that is needed on average. Other support could be provided to address childcare issues that often exist for adult learners.

## **Training and Resources**

- A central point of contact for stopout students is needed to support students who wish to return to the university. It will help to minimize the barriers that students experience as they persist through the university until graduation.
- Additional student tracking and early alert systems could help to identify students before they stopout.
- Additional staffing is needed for communication with stopout students. Students need to be actively engaged with faculty, advisors, and the campus community. Student systems should have texting capabilities, emails, and connections to social media platforms.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

- Repeat the same study three years from the start date of the 2020 Degrees When Due initiative currently being conducted in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.
- Repeat the current study for graduate-level stopout barriers and determine necessary resources.

- Further research should compare Prior Learning Assessment policies to learn about the strategies for effective and sustainable degree completion initiatives.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



Office of Research Integrity  
Institutional Review Board  
One John Marshall Drive  
Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205

IRB2 #00003206

August 21, 2020

Dennis Anderson, EdD  
Leadership Studies - COEPD

RE: IRBNet ID# 1629235-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Anderson:

**Protocol Title:** [1629235-1] Faculty and Administrators Perspective on Degree Completion Initiatives in the Commonwealth of Kentucky

**Site Location:** MU

**Submission Type:** New Project

APPROVED

**Review Type:** Exempt Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.104(d)(2), the above study was granted Exempted approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee. No further submission (or closure) is required for an Exempt study unless there is an amendment to the study. All amendments must be submitted and approved by the IRB Chair/Designee.

This study is for student Jennifer Hammonds.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Anna Robinson at (304) 696-2477 or robinsonn1@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Bruce F. Day'.

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP  
Director, Office of Research Integrity

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON DEGREE COMPLETION INITIATIVES IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY

#### Semi-Structured Interview

Jennifer Hammonds

Thank you for taking time to participate in this interview about degree completion at your institution. This interview is designed to gather information from faculty and administrators on various aspects of degree completion initiatives at three institutions in Kentucky. The interview will be digitally recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Some interviewees may be asked to review results later in order to check the validity of coding and analysis. All recordings and data will be stored and protected according to the confidentiality protocol established by the study's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Contact information for the IRB is available should you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant in this study. Again, thank you for participating. Your involvement in this study is much appreciated.

#### Demographic Questions:

1. How many total years of experience do you have as a faculty member/administrator?
2. How long have you been at your institution?
3. According to CPE, the Project Graduate initiative formally started in 2008. When do you recall the beginning of your participation in the Project Graduate initiative?
4. What led you to be involved in Project Graduate?
5. What training or professional development have you undertaken to make you an effective participant in the Project Graduate initiative or other degree completion initiatives.
6. Are you currently participating in any degree completion initiatives? If so, which one and for how long have you participated in this one?

#### Interview Questions:

1. In your opinion, why do students stopout?
2. Do students who stopout at your institution experience any different barriers than what the literature suggests as institutional, individual, and external?
3. What are the barriers or challenges that may hinder a student's persistence to graduation?
4. What specific challenges have you encountered within your institution with degree completion initiatives implementation? Probe – how about procedures and/or policies that might interfere with students' persistence?
5. What resources and/or training are available to faculty and staff for degree completion initiatives?
6. What training or professional development would be beneficial for faculty and administrators to make them an effective participant in degree completion initiatives or better assist a student to persist through graduation?

7. What tools or resources do you need to work with students who stopout at your institution?
8. What will it take for your institution to make degree completion initiatives sustainable as a natural part of the educational process?
9. What are your thoughts about the role of a centralized unit (office dedicated to degree completion) or a specific designated person (such as a Project Graduate coordinator) to accomplish degree completion goals at an institution?
10. Any other information that you think would be valuable to this interview and/or study?

## **Appendix C: University Contact Email**

Dear (Name):

As higher education professionals, one of our primary concerns is that of student persistence to a degree. As a registrar at Western Kentucky University, I am concerned, like you, that students have the prerequisite knowledge and academic preparation to successfully complete a degree.

I am researching the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how the institution may retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees. This qualitative research is a requirement to complete my EdD in Leadership Studies at Marshall University.

The purpose of this letter is to request your assistance in identifying faculty and administrators who participated in Project Graduate from 2008 to present. With your assistance, I would like to identify 5 faculty and 5-7 administrators who meet the above-mentioned criteria. The interview will take approximately one hour and will query participants regarding their experiences with students who stopout and how degree completion initiatives can assist with persistence and graduation. My goal with this research is: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies.

I shall contact you by phone on (date) to discuss this research opportunity. I hope to gain your support to research this very important issue. If you wish, you may contact me before this date at 740-935-9710 or [jennifer.hammonds@wku.edu](mailto:jennifer.hammonds@wku.edu).

I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Hammonds, Registrar  
Western Kentucky University

## **Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Email**

Dear (Name):

My name is Jennifer Hammonds, and I am a doctoral candidate in Leadership Studies at Marshall University. I am conducting research on faculty and administrator perspectives on Project Graduate in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The purpose of this study is: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies. The intent is to better understand the factors in students' lives that determine why they fail and how the institution may retain or recruit back stopouts for completion of certificates and degrees.

My study requires that I interview 5 faculty members and 5-7 administrators who participated in Project Graduate between the years of 2008 to present.

I am requesting your participation in my doctoral study and would welcome the opportunity to speak with you about the study at your convenience to explain the parameters and degree of commitment involved.

Please feel free to share this with others who you feel would meet the above mentioned criteria. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

If you have questions about the study, feel free to contact me via phone at C: 740-935-9710 or email at [jennifer.hammonds@wku.edu](mailto:jennifer.hammonds@wku.edu) or contact the Marshall University IRB office, via phone at 304-697-2770.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jennifer Hammonds, University Registrar  
Western Kentucky University



## Appendix E: Informed Consent

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview. It should take you approximately 60 minutes to complete this interview. This interview will be used in a dissertation research project by Jennifer Hammonds, doctoral student at Marshall University. The purpose of this interview is to gather information related to the factors in students' lives that determine why they stop out and how the institution may retain or recruit back these students for completion of degrees. Because completing a degree is an important goal for economic prosperity, better health, and increased civic responsibility, the goal of this study is: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not complete degrees, 2) to propose strategies that would increase degree completion, 3) to determine the necessary faculty and staff training needed to implement those strategies.

All records will be kept in strict confidentiality. No name will be placed in the dissertation nor will individual responses be identified, only compiled data.

Please answer each question to the best of your ability. Inability to answer questions will not result in personal risk or exposure of any sort. With your permission, the interview will be recorded to assure accuracy of your comments. When transcribed, your comments will be sent to you for verification. If you have other questions regarding this research project, the interview, or your role in the data-gathering process, please contact Jennifer Hammonds at 740-935-9710 or [jennifer.hammonds@wku.edu](mailto:jennifer.hammonds@wku.edu).

You are free to refuse to participate in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without penalty. Your participation will not affect your relationship with the institution(s) involved in this research project. There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

If you are not satisfied with the manner in which this study is being conducted, you may report (anonymously if you choose) any complaints to the Institutional Review Board by calling 304-697-2770 or addressing a letter to the Institutional Review Board, One John Marshall Drive, Huntington, WV 25755-8100.

My signature below indicates that all my questions have been answered. A copy of this form will be provided to you upon request. I agree to participate in the project as described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date